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# Heart of Asia

*Your Gateway to Afghanistan & the Region*

Sunday, April 18, 2021

Issue No. 948

www.heartofasia.af

10 afs



## Rise in US Troops in Afghanistan Before Withdrawal Likely: Pentagon

There may be a slight rise in the number of US troops in Afghanistan before the complete withdrawal in order to get logistical, engineering and force protection help for the current boots on the ground, stated the Pentagon.

The rise in number will be similar to the one when the US transitioned in Iraq, but the Pentagon did not provide a specific number, adding that it is necessary to ensure a safe and orderly drawdown.

On Wednesday, US President Joe Biden announced an end to the forever war in Afghanistan after 20 years, which formed the longest war, US has been involved in. ...

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## Safety Concept Signed to Ensure Security of Afghan Section of TAPI

Turkmenistan and Afghanistan have signed a safety concept agreement to ensure the security of the Afghan section of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline, Turkmenistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported.

According to Turkmenistan's Trend news agency, the signing took place on April 15 during a meeting between representatives of the two countries. The Safety Concept is an important step in the timely implementation of the TAPI gas pipeline project, including the development of a Safety Plan and Protocol, which are annexes to the Host Government Agreement, the foreign ministry's report said.

The parties exchanged views on the ongoing work on the TAPI gas pipeline construction project and they discussed the implementation of measures to be carried out by the end of August this year. ...

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# Use Istanbul Summit as An Opportunity: Hekmatyar Advices Taliban



Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the leader of Hezb-e-Islami party has urged the Taliban to attend the Istanbul Summit, scheduled to draw up a peace roadmap for Afghanistan along with the US, UN and Qatar, and use it as an opportunity.

The Taliban should negotiate with the Afghan people if they want peace, said Hekmatyar at a news conference in Kabul on Saturday. According to Hekmatyar, the Taliban have passed the stage of negotiating with the Americans.

He stressed that not announcing a ceasefire during the negotiations by the Taliban is not in the interest of this group and creates a negative mentality towards the Taliban in the world and among the people of Afghanistan.

Gulbuddin Hekmatyar also told the Taliban to present "their side" to the world at the Istanbul summit if they had strong and justified reasons for their position. "Someone who has good reasons should not be afraid to negotiate with anyone," he said.

The Hezb-e-Islami leader also spoke about the withdrawal of troops by September 11 and said that the delay in the troop drawdown from Afghanistan was not for logistical reasons, but for political reasons, which the US has so far not shared with the people of Afghanistan.

"Withdrawal of troops is a step forward, but it was a decision unilaterally made in violation of the Doha agreement and would not help resolve the Afghan crisis," he added.

The US, UN and Qatar are planning a peace summit in Istanbul with the Afghan government and the Taliban to chalk out a future roadmap for the country. Taliban has refused to participate in any peace talks till the troops have been withdrawn, while the Afghan government is ready with a unified peace plan for the April 24 summit.

## Mass COVID-19 Vaccination Drive Begins in Afghanistan

The Healthy Ministry on Friday announced that the Afghanistan government has started administering COVID-19 vaccines to all citizens above the age of 18.

Designated health centers in all 34 provinces have started vaccinating citizens with the Oxford-AstraZeneca jabs, according to the ministry.

A spokesperson said that healthcare workers, teachers, public sector employees, nomads, and people above the age of 50 remain the priority for getting the ...

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# War in Afghanistan Cost \$2 Trillion, Claimed 241,000 Lives: Study

As per a report released on Friday by the Costs of War Project, the conflict in Afghanistan has killed over 241,000 people, including Americans. Operations Enduring Freedom and Resolute Support in Afghanistan cost \$2 trillion, said the report, detailing the most recent estimates.

Most of the expenses were from the \$933 billion in the Pentagon's overseas contingency funding, stated the study, adding that 241,000 people died during the war which lasted two decades. "The numbers truly showcase the costs of war, not just for the US but for the Afghan people as well," said Catherine Lutz, co-director of Costs of War and professor at Brown University. The number of dead included at least 71,344 civilians; 2,442 American service members; 78,314 Afghan military and police; and 84,191 militants.



The money spent includes an increase of \$443 billion in the Pentagon's base budget to support the war, \$296 billion to care for veterans, \$530 billion to cover the interest on the money borrowed to fund the military deployments and \$59 billion in overseas contingency funds.

The Costs of War Project aims to

document "unacknowledged costs" of the post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere.

US President Joe Biden earlier this week announced that his administration would bring home the remaining 2,500 US troops from Afghanistan by September 11.

The report comes even as there are increasing cases of ...

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## War in Afghanistan...

clashes and counter-clashes between the Afghan government forces and the Taliban. The US, UN and Qatar are planning a peace summit in Istanbul with the Afghan government and the Taliban to chalk out a future roadmap for the country. Taliban has refused to participate in any peace talks till the troops have been withdrawn, while the Afghan government is ready with a unified peace plan for the April 24 summit.

## Safety Concept...

The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Pipeline (TAPI), also known as Trans-Afghanistan Pipeline, is a natural gas pipeline being developed with the assistance of the Asian Development Bank. The pipeline will transport natural gas from the Galkynysh Gas Field in Turkmenistan through Afghanistan into Pakistan and then to India. Construction on the project started in Turkmenistan in December 2015. The length of the Turkmen section of the pipeline will be 205 kilometers in length and will pass through the Afghan cities of Herat and Kandahar (816 kilometers), through the cities of Quetta and Multan across Pakistani territory (819 kilometers), and reach the city of Fazilka in India. The pipeline's design capacity is planned to be 33 billion cubic meters of gas per year, and the project's cost - about \$8 billion, Trend reports.

By Medea Benjamin and Nicolas J. S. Davies

# U.S. Joins Past Empires in Afghan Graveyard

An Afghan taxi-driver in Vancouver told one of us a decade ago that this day would come. "We defeated the Persian Empire in the eighteenth century, the British in the nineteenth, the Soviets in the twentieth. Now, with NATO, we're fighting twenty-eight countries, but we'll defeat them, too," said the taxi-driver, surely not a member of the Taliban, but quietly proud of his country's empire-killing credentials. Now, after nearly twenty years of a war that has been as bloody and futile as all those previous invasions and occupations, the last 3,500 US troops and their NATO brothers-in-arms will be coming home from Afghanistan. President Joe Biden tried to spin this as the United States leaving because it has achieved its objectives, bringing the terrorists responsible for 9/11 to justice and ensuring that Afghanistan would not be used as a base for a future attack on the United States. "We achieved those objectives," Biden said. "Bin Laden is dead and Al Qaeda is degraded. It's time to end the forever war." What Biden did not admit is that the United States and its allies, with all their money and firepower, were unable to vanquish the Taliban, who currently control about half of Afghanistan and are positioned to control even more in the coming months without a ceasefire. Nor did Biden admit that, in two decades, the United States and its allies have been unable to build up a stable, democratic, popular government or a competent military in the country. Like the U.S.S.R., the US is leaving in defeat, having squandered the lives of countless Afghans, 2,488 US troops and personnel, and trillions of dollars. A US withdrawal - especially one not based on conditions on the ground - is, nevertheless, a bold move for Biden. He is going against the advice of the US intelligence community and top Pentagon officials, including the head of the U.S.-Afghan Forces and the Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Biden is also coming under attack from Republicans and Democrats in Congress. Senator Mitch McConnell artfully slammed Biden's decision, accusing him of helping US enemies "ring in the anniversary of

the 9/11 attacks by gift-wrapping the country and handing it right back to them." Democratic Senator Jeanne Shaheen, a member of the Foreign Relations Committee, said the withdrawal "undermines our commitment to the Afghan people, particularly Afghan women." But while Biden is being pilloried by some for pulling out too soon, the truth is that he is violating a May 1 deadline for US troop withdrawal that was painstakingly negotiated under the Trump Administration. Ironically, Biden acknowledged in his speech on Wednesday that the withdrawal agreement the United States signed with the Taliban in February 2020 was a solemn commitment, but then he said US forces would begin their withdrawal on May 1 and complete it by September 11, which is not what was agreed to. After it was clear that the United States was going to break the May 1 withdrawal agreement, Mohammad Naeem, the Taliban spokesperson in Qatar, issued a statement that the Taliban would now not take part in the ten days of U.N.-led peace talks scheduled to begin in Istanbul on April 24, nor would it take part in any further peace negotiations until the last foreign soldiers leave Afghanistan. This is a reversion to the Taliban's long-standing position that it would not negotiate with a government backed by foreign occupation forces. US envoy Zalmay Khalilzad spent years of his life negotiating with the Taliban to arrive at the 2020 withdrawal agreement. Secretary Blinken took a potentially historic step back from US unilateralism when he invited the United Nations to lead a new Afghan peace process. And Russian Foreign Secretary Sergei Lavrov set the stage for a ceasefire and a peaceful transition of power by bringing the two Afghan warring parties together in Moscow in March, where they agreed to keep talking. By reneging on the May 1 deadline, President Biden has squandered much of the hard-won goodwill and trust that was painstakingly built up through these diplomatic efforts. It was not impossible to meet the May 1 deadline. The Trump Administration was steadily withdrawing troops, Biden's transition began in

November, and he's been President since late January. It is also unclear whether the United States will continue the war by providing airpower for the Afghan military and carrying out covert operations. Throughout these two decades, the United States has dropped more than 80,000 bombs on Afghanistan and waged a secret war with special forces, CIA operatives, mercenaries, and paramilitary units. Ending US airstrikes and covert operations is as vital to peace as withdrawing US troops. It's true that a US withdrawal may lead to setbacks in the gains made by Afghan women and girls. But those gains have been mainly in the capital city of Kabul. Two thirds of girls in Afghanistan still receive no primary education, and Afghan women will never achieve significant advances while their country remains at war. The United States and NATO military presence has made an end to violence impossible for twenty years, as the Taliban have long made clear that they will keep fighting as long as their country is under foreign occupation. And as long as the US continues to prop up a weak, corrupt government in Kabul, instability and political fragmentation is inevitable. Ending the fighting and investing a small fraction of US war spending in education and health care would do far more to improve the lives of Afghan women and girls. The United Nations, even with the full support and cooperation of the United States, will have its work cut out to convince the Taliban to rejoin talks. If the U.N. fails to negotiate a lasting ceasefire before the occupation forces withdraw, the US and its NATO allies will be leaving a country still at war with the Taliban, the Afghan government, and various warlords vying for power. We must hope that, in the coming months, the UN will find a way to bring the warring parties in Afghanistan together and craft a ceasefire and a workable peace process based on power sharing. After so many decades of war and intense suffering, much of it perpetrated by the United States and its allies, the Afghan people desperately need - and deserve - an end to this war.

## The System of political parties in Uzbekistan: "Do current parties represent social groups in society?"

A multiparty system has been established in the Republic of Uzbekistan, and is being developed in accordance with modern requirements, as a result of large-scale political, socio-economical and legal reforms that were gradually carried out in the process of independent statehood of nearly thirty years. Speaking of multipartyism, "only if a multiparty system is established in the political system, can the state fully represent the interests of the people, ensure the supremacy of national interests, the interests of classes and social groups, and create a solid foundation for stability in society" - M. Duverge, a well-known french expert on Western partology. As per the national and foreign experience, developed multiparty system, maturity and activism of political parties and civic institutions, a high level of political and legal culture of citizens are important factors and conditions for the success of democratic reforms in society. It should be noted political parties operating on the multiparty basis will be provided with conditions and opportunities for legal equal operations, to unite in blocs, the transition to constructive confrontation and the creation of a

healthy environment of inter-party competition, the identification, systematization and protection of the interests of social groups. As in all democratic countries, elections in the Republic of Uzbekistan are conducted in accordance with the universally recognized democratic standards on the basis of unity, equal, direct, alternative, open and transparent, multiparty ballot. During the elections, political parties seek to win through their candidates. This creates a unique environment of competition and examination, and the final results reveal the realism of political parties in society. At the same time, each political party strives to effectively convey the goals and objectives expressed in its program to the people, in particular, to social groups aimed at self-support. As of today, five political parties are operating on the basis of multiparty system in the New Uzbekistan - the People's Democratic Party of Uzbekistan (1991), the Social Democratic Party of Uzbekistan "Adolat" (1995), the Democratic Party of Uzbekistan "Milliy Tiklanish" (1995), the Movement of Entrepreneurs and Businessmen - the Liberal Democratic Party of Uzbekistan (2003) and the Ecological

Party of Uzbekistan (2019). It is well known that each party, as a political power, seeks to protect the interests of certain sectors of society, thereby expanding its status and influence by forming and further expanding its electorate. The dynamic section of members of political parties operating in the country is as follows:  
1. Movement of Entrepreneurs and Businessmen - Liberal Democratic Party of Uzbekistan - more than 780 thousand;  
2. People's Democratic Party of Uzbekistan - more than 501 thousand;  
3. Social Democratic Party of Uzbekistan "Adolat" - more than 457 thousand;  
4. Democratic Party of Uzbekistan "Milliy Tiklanish" - about 314 thousand;  
5. Ecological Party of Uzbekistan - more than 280 thousand. The major political tasks of the parties are the legitimate competition for power, the consistent implementation of the goals and objectives listed in the election program, direct or indirect participation in the development of domestic and foreign policy of the state. Every political party, operating in modern Uzbekistan, endeavours

to gain firm trust and voice of its electorate, to courageously advance program goals that serve the interests and aspirations of a broad constituency, to gain majority in Parliament, and thus to be leading party to provide new proposals and practical solutions in order to develop the state and the society. Each political party relies primarily on its electorate, consisting of various social groups, and through them the support of the people. The prestige of the party in society will be further enhanced by the implementation of important measures to realize the interests of the party's electorate and fully guarantee their rights and freedoms. It can be stated that today the five political parties in our country have their distinct programs and electorate. Whereas in the past, particularly 15-20 years ago, there had been relative proximity in the program and in the electorate of the parties, their ideological and organizational activities are now improving, and their distinctive characteristics are becoming more and more noticeable. At the same time, the success of any political party is determined by the attractiveness and practical efforts of its political ideology. As per the electorates of the

operating political parties. The People's Democratic Party of Uzbekistan, the oldest party in the country. Its electorate - a population in need of targeted social-protection and social-support from the state and society (pensioners whose pensions and social benefits are insufficient for living, people with disabilities, parents raising children with disabilities, women with many children, children deprived of parental care, the lonely elderly and other vulnerable groups of the population, the unemployed able-bodied population, people with difficulty finding employment, including graduates of educational institutions entering the labour market, those who do not have a permanent job and a stable income, internal and external labour migrants). The Social Democratic Party of Uzbekistan "Adolat" considers its electorate as workers and laborers, highly qualified specialists, public servants, teachers, doctors, scientists and engineers, service workers. The Democratic Party of Uzbekistan "Milliy Tiklanish" is considers intellectuals, including workers in science and education, culture, arts and media, young people, the creators of our future, including scientists, educators and teachers, artists, athletes, tourism, representatives of the sphere of folk medicine and crafts, employees of citizens' self-governing ...

# USAID Contributes Over \$23M in Grant Loans for Farmers

The Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock announced on Monday that it is set to grant loans to 7 thousand Afghan farmers in the current solar year through the Agricultural Development Fund (ADF), a program lead and financed by the United States.

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has invested over 1 billion and 800 million Afs in the ADF, for the current solar year.

The process to receive applications for receiving loans has been started and will continue until the end of the solar year, MAIL said.

"The Agriculture Development Fund is planned to grant 1.8 billion Afs (over \$23M) in loans to over 7 thousand farmers in the current year (1400),"

said Akbar Rustami, MAIL spokesman. He added, "The loan distribution process has begun since the beginning of the fiscal year."

The United States' USAID program each year contributes a significant fund to the Afghan Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Livestock under the Agriculture Development Fund.

The Academy of Sciences of Afghanistan (ASA), meanwhile, criticized the loan program under ADF, who said that establishing agricultural development bank would support the efficiency of these loans.

"For many years we hear that a development program functions in the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Livestock, but indeed, it does not have a useful and practical outcome that is expected," Head of the agriculture



department of the ASA, Mohammad Yaseen Farahmand said.

"We do not see any significant achievement in this program therefore, the only effective way is to create an agricultural development

bank," he added.

According to figures provided by MAIL, last year over 1.5 billion Afs were granted in loans to the 6 thousand Afghan farmers through the ADF program.

### Mass COVID-19...

vaccine shot.

He added that the country expects 1.5 million vaccine doses in the coming months from the COVAX facility, a global initiative aimed at delivering vaccines to low- and middle-income countries. Afghanistan started its first vaccinations toward the end of March and plans to cover at least 60% of the population by 2022.

Owing to limited resources, the country with 39 million people has only conducted close to 3,80,000 COVID-19 tests to date. The positive case count in Afghanistan currently stands at around 57,700, including over 2,500 deaths.

### Rise in US...

After Biden's announcement, even NATO forces said that they will withdraw their forces by the US deadline of September 11.

"It is not out of the realm of possibility that for a short period of time, there will have to be some additional enabling capabilities added to Afghanistan, to help effect a safe, orderly and deliberately planned drawdown of everybody by the president's deadline, early September," Pentagon spokesman John Kirby told reporters at a news conference on Friday.

"As we transitioned out of Iraq, of course, it's logical to assume that you may need some logistics help, maybe some engineering help. You may have to add some force protection capabilities, temporarily, just to make sure that the drawdown goes in a safe, orderly and effective way," Kirby said.

Kirby added that the Department of Defense is still working out what the future bilateral security relationship is going to be with Afghanistan. However, he specified that it will be similar to bilateral relations with other countries, without boots on the ground. Military presence will be limited to those required to ensure protection of the diplomatic mission.

### The System of...

bodies, including patriotic and creative people's representatives who support the priority idea of «Milliy tiklanishdan – milliy yuksalish sari» (From national revival to national uplift) as their electorate. The Movement of Entrepreneurs and Businessmen, the Liberal Democratic Party of Uzbekistan, which has been the leading political force in the country for the last 15-20 years. Its electorates – ownership layer, small businesses, entrepreneurs and businessmen, farmers, representatives of public organizations, innovative individuals and scientists in the sphere of manufacturing who seeks to enhance people's welfare by their entrepreneurship and initiative. Founded in 2019, the electorate of the Ecological Party of Uzbekistan (formerly the Ecological Movement of Uzbekistan) - ecologists, biologists, chemists, geologists, irrigators, representatives of the agricultural sector, health workers, citizens who are not indifferent towards the protection of the environment and ensuring environmental sustainability, and socio-politically active citizens.

Over the past five years, the rise of political parties in Uzbekistan to a new level, the wider involvement of social groups in society as their electorate has been consistently demonstrated. In particular, the President's video-conference address with deputies of the Oliy Majlis, political parties and the Ecological Movement of Uzbekistan (now the Ecological Party) in 2017 highlighted some problems and deficiencies in the activities of political parties, and the activities of the past period have been critically reviewed and important tasks have been identified with a view to further enhancing the reforms and further improving the activities of the parties.

It was also stated that political parties need to radically change their methods of operation, to systematically communicate with the population and the electorate, to put aside lofty rhetoric, to gain the trust of

voters (social groups within the electorate), to work in harmony with the lower echelons, to reconsider their program goals and objectives, work in the ideological field, to make the necessary changes and additions, to study the world experience, to strengthen international cooperation, to train and create a reserve of personnel, to work consistently with personnel.

Consistent reforms have been carried out to further strengthen the role of political parties in the life of the state and society, to create a healthy competitive environment between them on the basis of the "the National Action Strategy on Five Priority Development Areas 2017-2021" – an important program of the New Uzbekistan.

The Electoral Code was adopted, the political field was fully given to political parties, the quota for Ecological Movement, the right of citizens to nominate candidates for district and city Councils from local self-government bodies was also excluded. Now, the country's political parties have the right to nominate their candidates in the elections to the Legislative Chamber of the Oliy Majlis in 150 constituencies instead of 135. Such changes have allowed parties to become more visible in the political field, to develop multiparty system and inter-party competition, and to gain more positions in Parliament.

It is known that in the last elections held on December 22, 2019 (including repeat elections on January 5, 2020) 150 deputies of the Legislative Chamber of the Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 831 deputies of regional and Supreme State Legislature, 5,738 deputies of cities and districts were elected. International observers acknowledged that the elections were held in an atmosphere of healthy competition, intense debates between political parties, and that the role of the media in this process had significantly increased. In the conditions of the New Uzbekistan, the growing political and legal culture, horizon, civic position of citizens was reflected in the image of the electorate.

It should be noted that the 2019 elections were completely different from previous elections in that the demand of citizens, especially the electorate, for political parties was high, and healthy competition between political parties was more intense than ever. Because the level of socio-political activity of today's voters is much higher, it differs from the voters of five years ago by its political and legal thinking.

At the current new stage, political parties in Uzbekistan are actively carrying out operations to increase the number of their members, further improve their programs, consistently implement their goals and objectives in everyday life, and most importantly, consistently communicate with the party electorate and involve deeply and systematically into the electorate, actively seeking practical and organizational solutions to their problems, further ensuring their legitimate interests. Political parties also seek to deepen the representation of the interests of social groups selected as their main electorate within the legislative and executive branches. This will create a solid foundation for the expansion of the ranks of party members and the further growth of their position.

In conclusion, in Uzbekistan today, political parties are striving to reach a new level. In order to gain a stronger position and influence in the political and public life of the country, to strengthen the confidence of the electorate, represent and involve different social groups in society, to further enhance the ideological and programmatic, organizational and practical propaganda activities of political parties for the full implementation of the goals and objectives set out in the Charter and Action Plans, and directing all efforts towards the effective functioning of the entire hierarchical (top-down) system of the party structure. Ultimately, the influence of parties as a political force will be expanding among the population, various social groups.

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Print: Waygal Printing .Co - +93 - 202512626

# China, U.S. Ready for Cooperation on Climate Change

Chinese Vice Premier Han Zheng on Friday met via video link with John Kerry, visiting U.S. Special Presidential Envoy for Climate, and both sides expressed willingness to carry out communication and cooperation on climate change.

Calling climate change a matter concerning the welfare of all mankind, Han, also a member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, said China has implemented the national strategy of actively responding to climate change, acting as an important participant, contributor and leader in terms of global ecological conservation. Noting China's pledge last year to reach peak carbon dioxide emissions by 2030 and become carbon-neutral by 2060, as well as new measures to ramp up nationally determined contributions, Han said China is firm in resolve and forceful in action in tackling climate change.

"We'll reach the above-mentioned goals in a down-to-earth manner," said Han.

China and the United States, as the world's largest developing and developed country respectively, share a lot of common interests in tackling climate change, Han said. "China attaches importance to carrying out dialogue and cooperation on climate change with the U.S. side."

"China welcomes the U.S. return to the Paris Agreement, and expects the U.S. side to uphold the Agreement, shoulder its due responsibilities and make due contributions," said Han.

In responding to climate change, Han said the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities should be followed.

He said China is ready to maintain dialogue and cooperation with the U.S. side, and work with all parties to jointly promote the implementation of the Paris Agreement.



For his part, Kerry said the U.S.-China cooperation is of vital importance in responding to the global challenge of climate change, hailing China's tremendous efforts made in this regard. He said the United States is willing to work with

China to enhance communication, deepen cooperation, and speed up the implementation of the goals set in the Paris Agreement, to jointly contribute more to responding to the crisis of climate change.

## A look at the world

### UN Security Council Oks Ceasefire Monitors to Libya

The UN Security Council unanimously approved on Friday the deployment of 60 ceasefire monitors to Libya.

The resolution that easily cleared the international body also called on Libya's Government of National Accord to prepare for "free, fair and inclusive national" elections in December.

"Free, fair and credible elections will allow the Libyan people to elect a representative and unified government and reinforce the independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and national unity of Libya," the resolution says.



It further called to "ensure the full, equal and meaningful participation of women and the inclusion of youth."

Jan Kubis, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres's special envoy for Libya, urged Libyan lawmakers on March 24 to pass necessary legislation by July "at the latest" so that the elections can be held as planned, and Friday's resolution says the legislation should be in place no later than July 1.

A ceasefire between the UN-recognized government and forces loyal to renegade General Khalifa Haftar has largely held since it was brokered in October, and Secretary-General Antonio Guterres had called for international monitors to be deployed to monitor the situation.

Libya has been beset by conflict since former longtime strongman Muammar Qaddafi was overthrown in 2011 amid a mass revolt supported by NATO. Civil war ensued in the aftermath of his ouster, and it has persisted for nearly a decade.

Libya is expected to hold nationwide parliamentary and presidential elections in December after having polls delayed for three years amid the conflict between government and Haftar's forces.

### COVID: More Than Three Million People Have Died of Coronavirus



The global death toll from the coronavirus has topped a staggering three million, with cases more than 140 million, amid repeated setbacks in the vaccination campaign and a deepening crisis in places such as Brazil, India and France.

The number of lives lost as of Saturday, as compiled by Johns Hopkins University, is about equal to the population of Kyiv (Ukraine), Caracas (Venezuela) or Lisbon (Portugal). It is higher than Chicago's population of 2.7 million and equivalent to Philadelphia and Dallas combined.

And the true number is believed to be significantly higher because of possible government concealment and the many cases overlooked in the early stages of the outbreak that was first reported in Wuhan, China, towards the end of 2019.

When, in January this year, the world passed the bleak threshold of two million deaths, immunisation drives had just started in Europe and the United States.

Today, vaccination is under way in more than 190 countries, though progress in bringing the virus under control varies widely.

While the campaigns in the US and the United Kingdom have hit their stride and people and businesses there are beginning to contemplate life after the pandemic, other places, mostly poorer countries but some rich ones as well, are lagging behind in putting shots in arms and have imposed new lockdowns and other restrictions as virus cases soar.

"This is not the situation we want to be in 16 months into a pandemic, where we have proven control measures," said Maria Van Kerkhove, one of the World Health Organization's COVID-19 experts.

In Brazil, where deaths are running at approximately 3,000 per day, accounting for one-quarter of the lives lost worldwide in recent weeks, the crisis has been likened to a "raging inferno" by one WHO official.

### France, Germany, Ukraine Urges Russia To Retreat Troops

France, Germany and Ukraine on Friday jointly called on Russia to dismantle troops at the Ukraine border and de-escalate the current crisis.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who is on an official visit to Paris, held talks with his French counterpart Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel who joined the two via video link.

The trio in particular discussed "the security situation on the Ukrainian-Russian border and in eastern Ukraine" and "shared concerns about the growth of Russian troops on the border with Ukraine and in the illegally annexed Crimea," a statement from the German Foreign Ministry said.

They jointly called for these "troop



reinforcements to be dismantled in order to de-escalate the situation."

Taking to Twitter, Macron said together with Ukraine and Germany, France is determined to find a political solution.

"Regarding the situation in Donbas, together with Ukraine and Germany, we continue to mobilize our efforts and continue to be determined to find a political solution, which is the only possible one," he said.

He further assured of continuing the momentum between Ukraine and France, ushered by Zelensky's exchange.

Following the meeting, Zelensky said he would like the four countries - Ukraine, Russia, France, and Germany - to get together. Under the Normandy Format talks in June 2014, leaders of the four countries informally established contact to resolve the war in Donbas region following invasion by Russian forces.

By September, the two warring neighbors and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe signed an agreement called the Minsk protocol to implement a peace plan and end fighting, which has not met complete success.

Underlining support for Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, Macron and Merkel stressed the need to "fully implement the Minsk agreement" and pledged to continue efforts in the Normandy Format.



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