

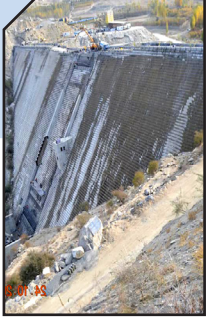
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# Heart of Asia

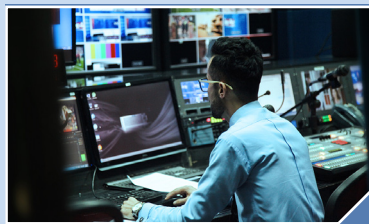
Your Gateway to Afghanistan & the Region

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**Media advocates warn of challenges following troop pullout**

A number of media advocates warned on Saturday that hard-won freedom of speech could face challenges once foreign troops withdraw from Afghanistan. According to them, international pressure has forced the government to support the media and freedom of expression in the country. Media advocacy group NAI's Chief Executive Mujib Khilwatgar stated: "Currently, the Afghan government supports the media but not for internal will, but as a result of international pressure." He said the Afghan media would certainly face "serious challenges by the government after the withdrawal of troops." ... **P3**



**6, Including Lecturer, Killed in Gunmen Attacks in Kabul: Police**

At least six people, including two civilians and four security force members, were killed in different security incidents in Kabul over the last 12 hours. In one of the incidents, a government employee, Baryalai Tokhi, was killed in an attack by unidentified gunmen in the Rishkhor area in Kabul's District 7 on Friday evening, sources said. Police confirmed the incident and said it is under investigation. Meanwhile, police said that Rafi Osmani, a lecturer at Peshgam Higher Education Institute, was killed in an attack by gunmen when he was on the way to the university in Kabul's District 4 early on Saturday morning. Also, four security force members were killed in an attack by armed men in Panja Chinar area in Kabul's Paghman district on Saturday morning, police said. Kabul police spokesman Ferdaws Faramarz said all the incidents are under investigation. This comes amidst a new surge in targeted attacks in Kabul and its surrounding districts.

## Over 47,000 Civilians Killed In 20 Years of Deadly War in Afghanistan



sustained by civilians in Afghanistan. The most reliable estimates came almost a decade later when the UN as well as an array of local rights groups began compiling data. The Watson Institute of International and Public Affairs at Brown University in the US later documented the earlier figures from 2001. According to its estimates, at least 2,375 civilians were killed in the first year of the invasion in 2001, as the Northern Alliance of mainly anti-Taliban groups in Afghanistan began taking back control of the country with the support of US air power and ground offensives. Head of Afghanistan Peace and Human Rights Organization Nizamuddin Katawazi told Anadolu Agency that the civilian casualties remained relatively low in the following years, until the late 2010s, because there was minimal resistance from the Taliban as the group retreated. "The Taliban gradually vacated positions in northern Afghanistan and across the country, putting little resistance in populated urban centers," he said, adding that it was a time when a peaceful political settlement in Afghanistan was lost. According to the Watson Institute, 400 civilian lives were lost in 2002, 450 more in 2003, and the ... **P3**

The most conservative estimates by local and international rights group suggest that close to 47,600 civilians have been killed and more than double that number injured in Afghanistan during the 20 years of war since the US invasion. As the US prepares to leave the war-ravaged country just before the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks in September, an array of Afghans

remains insecure and frightened due to internal rival factions and hostile regional powers just as they were before the UN-authorized invasion in 2001. Previously, the country had lost at least 1.5 million people as a direct result of a conflict, with a further 2 million permanently disabled after the Soviet invasion (1979 and 1989). Though the number of deaths

reduced after the Soviet Union's withdrawal in 1989, it did not end. 2001 to 2011: Steady rise in killing spree When the US and the UK launched Operation Enduring Freedom in October 2001, which was later joined by NATO allies, there was no mechanism in place for a number of initial years to document the losses

**Health Ministry Says Preparations Underway to Curb 3rd COVID Wave**

With the number of daily positive cases increasing daily, the Ministry of Public Health says it is monitoring the outbreak and is preparing to curb the third wave. A statement published by the Ministry of Public Health states that this issue was raised by Wahid Majrooh, the acting minister of health, on Saturday when he met representatives of the relevant departments, heads of public health, representatives of the private sector and institutions. "Although the cases of coronavirus in Afghanistan is low and the situation is fortunately under control, we ... **P2**



**CIA Chief Reportedly Made Unannounced Trip to Kabul**

CIA Director William Burns reportedly made an unannounced visit to Kabul recently amid mounting concerns about Afghanistan's capability to fight terrorism once the US and NATO forces withdraw. The Associated Press reported Saturday that two credible sources had confirmed the visit. In Washington, the CIA declined to comment when asked by AP about the director's schedule and the agency's role in Afghanistan. However, a senior former Afghan security official told AP that two of six units trained and run by the CIA to track militants have already been transferred to Afghan control. Two Afghan officials told AP that Burns quietly visited Kabul last weekend. They would not say whom Burns met with, but said some of the discussions addressed Afghanistan's preparedness after the U.S. pullout. Burns also reportedly reassured



Afghan officials that the U.S. would continue to be engaged in counterterrorism efforts. AP reports that concerns are mounting that Afghanistan's security forces won't be able to halt a march by Taliban insurgents on government-held territory or battle terrorist groups without the help of U.S. and NATO soldiers. The former security official told AP he believes terrorism-fighting

capabilities will be significantly reduced once the roughly 2,500 to 3,500 U.S. troops and 7,000 allied NATO soldiers leave. The official said the CIA had been training and running Afghan special forces known as Counter Terrorism Pursuit Teams, or CTPT. According to AP, the teams are located in the provinces of Kunar, Paktia, Kandahar, Kabul, Khost and Nangarhar. ... **P2**

## CIA Chief...

The official said the plan is to gradually hand them over to the National Directorate of Security (NDS). So far, the Kunar and Paktia units have been transferred to Afghan control, he said.

The CTPT teams are feared by many Afghans and have been implicated in extra-judicial killings of civilians. In 2019, the head of the Afghan intelligence service, Masoom Stanikzai, was forced to resign after one of these units was implicated in the summary execution of four brothers.

Earlier this year, in Afghanistan's eastern Khost province, one of the teams was accused of gunning down civilians in a counterterrorism operation. The United Nations has also criticized the tactics of these units, previously blaming them for a rise in civilian casualties along with insurgent groups. The former security official said that without the U.S. troops, Afghanistan's technical intelligence gathering will suffer. Right now, some of the greatest successes in fighting terrorism and the narcotics trade have come from U.S. intelligence gathering, he said.

## Health Ministry...

are still prepared to contain the third wave [of the coronavirus]," he said.

He has instructed all the departments to take precautions and even establish a monitoring team to access the situation. He called for clinical teams to take care of patients at home, spread awareness and equip health centers.

The total number of cases now stand at 57,843, while the number of reported deaths is 2,582 and the total number of recoveries is 52,392.

By Rahman Malik

# Peace or civil war: US withdrawal

The history of Afghanistan shows that whoever attacked or tried to occupy it, had always suffered heavily starting from the UK to USSR and now the US. The USSR was an uninvited guest to grab Afghanistan but eventually, it had to vacate disgracefully with heavy losses as it paid the heavy cost of disintegration of the USSR. The US did not learn a lesson from the USSR and even though none of the Afghan nationals were involved in 9/11 yet it attacked Tora Bora and also dragged Pakistan into this war and we are still paying the price for favouring the US in this attack whereas the US still considers us as a suspect. I recall an official meeting with President Bush Jr in the White House; I had stated in the said meeting that the US would not win this war in Afghanistan as all the American allies including Pakistan do not have a common strategy to fight against the common enemy. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was also present in the meeting who endorsed my assessment and our PM Syed Yousef Raza Gilani was also present there. In fact, it was a pointless war against those who were created by the US itself including Osama Bin Laden; it was like dismantling its own creation which grew like a monster. So far, the US has spent more than \$2 trillion to sustain this war apart from the fact how Pakistan's logistics and resources have been consumed in this non-ending war.

Let me say frankly, that this war in fact became a big source of corruption and money laundering by those who handled the funds for this war. This war destroyed the cities of Afghanistan and created the Taliban who I named the 'Zaliman'. The corruption as a by-product of this war helped many to build their villas in Dubai and filled the banks in Switzerland and France.

It requires a separate book, exposing many in Pakistan and others. While the war handlers received dollars and other incentives, during the same timeframe, every house in Afghanistan received dead bodies of their loved ones who were either killed by the mighty American drones or in the hands of the Taliban. Suffering in terms of killing through drones was witnessed on both sides of the border. The entire Muslim Ummah bloc now looks like a destroyed village from Libya to Afghanistan after the Arab Spring, which was another target in the name of 9/11.

Will there be any war commission that will ever investigate the Afghan war and Arab Spring operation? The statement regarding the withdrawal of forces by President Joe Biden did not come as a surprise because withdrawal of the forces has been a generic statement by almost every incoming American President, which is a matter of public record.

I do not mean that the statement of President Joe Biden is not serious, however, having interacted with him I can say that he will seriously work to withdraw the forces though I expect opposition from the CIA and the Pentagon. I hope and wish that President Joe Biden should mark his name in history as a peacemaker by ending this longest war of the world. In fact, Afghanistan has become a military and intelligence drill ground for many countries at the cost of thousands of Afghans and partly Pakistan. I have always maintained that a safe Afghanistan means a safe Pakistan and we also want Afghanistan to handle their issues themselves. I had a number of meetings with Ashraf Ghani, former President Hamid Karzai, Mohammad Hanif Atmar, the current Afghan Foreign Minister and

Sayed Jalal Karim (later Presidential candidate). I have always firmly stated that the solution of Afghanistan is not in the bullet but dialogue, whereas Pakistan has also been helping Afghan authorities at the cost of our own suffering because of Afghanistan. Pakistan and Afghanistan need to work out some homegrown mutually agreed plan in order to march towards peace and this model of Afghan peace (MAP) plan needs to be well deliberated and implemented. It was worrying for every Pakistani to hear an unfriendly statement from President Ashraf Ghani recently at the Presidential Palace in which he stated: "Today, it is a day of decision for Pakistan," Ghani said. "If our country is destabilised, their country will also be unstable and if they (Pakistan) want our improvement, they will also improve, the choice of friendship and enmity is in Pakistan's hands".

The main spirit of this statement is a warning to Pakistan which is serious and there are clear threats to Pakistan and obviously, the government of Pakistan owes a befitting response to Afghanistan. Unfortunately, within three days of his statement, we noticed a bombing at Serena Hotel in Quetta. Let us have a hypothetical model of Afghanistan after the American withdrawal. The most important aspect of this decision by Joe Biden is that it is not a condition-based drawdown, unlike former US presidents who have generally put forth a redeployment condition in Afghanistan based on the threat posed by local enemies and the capabilities of local allies. Even when Donald Trump had announced for withdrawal in last year's negotiations with the Taliban, he had insisted that the Taliban denounce al-Qaeda and refrain from attacks on US troops. By this announcement,

it seems that the peace process will eventually stand null and void and unlikely to progress since the Taliban have no incentive to compromise now that the troops are leaving without conditions. But there is an opportunity for the Taliban to rise unhindered as local Afghan forces will not be able to resist them marching towards the capital. Taliban leaders are even of the view that they have won the war already. As the Taliban's deputy leader, Sirajuddin Haqqani, recently said: "No Mujahid ever thought that one day we would face such an improved state, or that we will crush the arrogance of the rebellious emperors and force them to admit their defeat at our hands. Fortunately, today, we and you are experiencing better circumstances." This statement of Siraj Haqqani confirms my well-thought apprehensions. US lawmakers and other analysts are not happy with Biden's decision as they are uncertain about what will happen in Afghanistan once US President Joe Biden withdraws the remaining 2,500 to 3,500 US troops by September 11 to end the country's longest war. Afghanistan will turn into a mass graveyard unless some mechanism of the US is deployed to stop the likely civil war. Afghan peace will depend on the understanding between the Taliban and the Afghan government, the second possibility is that it could lead to the creation of a new terrorist haven in Afghanistan with widespread influence and rule of Taliban. The Taliban take over cannot be ruled out post-withdrawal of American forces. We would not want the Iraq-like situation of 2011 to be repeated in Afghanistan; it may bring another wave of terror.

It will be a challenging moment for President Ashraf Ghani to deal with such a change in the region with no...**P3**

By Ryan McMaken

## The United States Has Declared Defeat in Two More Wars

President Biden announced last week that he planned to remove all combat troops from Afghanistan by September, which he says will mark the end of what is now a twenty-year war in the central Asian country.

A week earlier, the US and Iraq reaffirmed a deal to withdraw "any remaining combat forces" from Iraq, and to further wind down the US involvement there, which dates back to the 2003 invasion.

In both cases, of course, the stated plans to end military intervention have been framed in polite language designed to make it look like the US is leaving on its own terms—and also to allow the US regime some level of plausibility when it claims "mission accomplished."

In reality, of course, both Iraq and Afghanistan are just two more wars that the United States has lost in a long list of botched military interventions dating back to Vietnam and Korea. Moreover, these withdrawals signal the US's continued geopolitical decline in a world that is becoming multipolar and highly motivated to bring to a final end the US's vanishing

"unipolar moment."

But what exactly do we mean by "lost" in this context? Well, by the standards of the objectives presented by the US regime itself when these wars began, these wars are complete failures.

For example, we were told Iraq and Afghanistan would become "democracies" where Western-style human rights are protected and valued. That was the humanitarian justification.

We were also told these countries would become reliable allies of the United States, sort of like Germany or Japan. That was the geopolitical justification.

The US has failed on both fronts. The Failure of Global Democracy When the United States first invaded Afghanistan, following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the US regime claimed the mission was both a punitive and a strategic one. The military intervention was, we were told, designed to punish and disable the Taliban regime, which was fostering terrorist training camps of the sort that supposedly led to 9/11.

But, not surprisingly, Washington then decided it was going to stay in Afghanistan for a long time. The voters were soon told to brace for a generational war, one that could last decades. After twenty or twenty-five years, though, we were told Afghanistan would become a liberal democracy where women could walk around in miniskirts and the youth would spend their days studying poetry and engineering at universities. Afghanistan, we were told, would end up like postwar Germany and Japan—outposts of Western liberal democracy. Needless to say, the Pentagon never mentions that anymore. Even after twenty years, the political situation in Afghanistan can perhaps be most accurately described as an ongoing series of wars between warlords, with US-supported warlords on the "good" side. The idea that these US-aligned warlords represent the side of human rights, though, is wishful thinking at its most extreme.

Two years after the occupation of Afghanistan began, the promises of "global democracy" became even

more grandiose as the regime tried to grow support for the Iraq invasion. The Bush administration pushed a grand vision for the entire region with claims that a new democratic Iraq would serve as the launching point for a total makeover of the Middle East, which would soon become a region of liberal democracies. The US repeatedly claimed that Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein was something of a reincarnation of Hitler—rather than the run-of-the-mill dictator he was—and suggested that once Hussein was gone freedom and justice would flower throughout the region. That didn't happen. Indeed, even if life improved for some Iraqis—such as the Kurds—life became far worse for countless other Iraqis. As noted by NPR in 2018, as a result of the Iraq War, Iraq devolved into one of the most dangerous and corrupt countries in the world. With an estimated 500,000 killed in war and violence since 2003, few families have been left untouched. Although security has improved immensely, corruption remains entrenched. "The majority of people before—Sunni and Shiite—did not like the [Hussein] regime," says [General Najm al-Jabouri]. "But many people, when they compare between the situation

under Saddam Hussein and now, find maybe their life under Saddam Hussein was better."

Today, Iraq's standard of living remains crippled by the US invasion, and the democratic government amounts to a regime that is little more than a group of competing kleptocracies.

Moreover, the US invasion paved the way for the rise of religious extremism in Iraq, which led to the near-total destruction of Iraq's Christian population—which had enjoyed legal protection under Hussein.

Rather than spread notions of liberal democracy and human rights in the region, the US regime has only doubled down in its support for the most repressive regimes. The US remains an enthusiastic supporter of the Saudi regime, one of the most despotic and blood-soaked regimes on earth today. The US has been propping up the military dictatorship in Egypt. Through its interventions in Libya and Syria, the US has taken the side of terrorists and Islamic zealots who traffic young women for sex slavery and enforce the most draconian sorts of Islamic law—something much more rare under the Hussein regime, or under the secular regime still ruling in Syria.

The US's regime change ...

**P3**

# Kabul's Shah wa Arus Dam to be Inaugurated in Days

The much-anticipated Shah wa Arus Dam in Kabul's Shakar Dara district will be inaugurated in the upcoming days, officials said as they visited the construction site on Friday.

"We are finally in a stage to address legal issues with the residents and inaugurate the dam next weekend," Kabul governor Mohammad Yaqub Haidari said.

The construction of Shah wa Arus Dam was interrupted many times due to technical and security issues and it took at least 11 years to be completed. Shakardara residents complained about the delays in the construction of the dam and said their houses and lands are in an area where the dam has been constructed and that the government has not paid them

compensations for their properties.

"It has been ten years that the people are expecting the completion of the project. During this period, the people could not look after their gardens and trees," a resident of Shakardara said. But officials vowed to make sure the dam becomes operational properly.

"I promise you all that no technical issue will be there... We are here to prepare for collecting water in the reservoir of the dam," said Wais Basiri, the deputy head of the National Water Affairs Regulation Authority.

The district governor of Shakar Dara, Gawhar Khan Baburi, said there is a need for joint efforts by many government institutions to protect the dam against possible harms.

"The Ministry of Energy and Water and



other relevant institutions have said that that the dam is a national project; therefore, more attention should be paid to it," he said. "I thank all Afghan security forces for ensuring the safety of the dam."

According to him, the dam has the

capacity of storing 9 million cubic meters of water and it would irrigate 3,000 hectares of land.

Over \$50 million has been invested in the dam, Baburi said, adding that the dam will generate 1.2 megawatts of power once it is operational.

### Over 47,000...

figure further dropped to 230 in 2004, before surging to 413 in 2005, 929 in 2006, and over a thousand for the first time in 2007 when 1,582 civilian lives were lost. This pattern never reversed, as 2,118 civilians got killed in 2008, 2,412 more in 2009, and 2,794 in 2010.

This meant that 13,703 Afghan civilians were killed in the first decade of the war, with reports suggesting that the number of injured is at least double that.

As per the perpetrators, since the Taliban regime was dismantled and the group had not regained the momentum of insurgency, many of the civilian casualties were attributed to the foreign and local anti-Taliban forces. 2011 to 2021: Bloodshed touches new heights

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) began tracking civilian casualties in 2009, Anna Maria Adhikari, head of its outreach team, told Anadolu Agency.

Latest among the UNAMA's series of reports in this regard was issued last week, noting that "extraordinary levels" of harm was inflicted on civilians in Afghanistan in first three months of 2021, with 573 killed and 1,210 injured – a 29% increase as compared with the same period last year.

The "Afghanistan Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict 2021 First Quarter Report" by the UNAMA expressed particular concerns over the 37% increase in the number of women killed and injured, and a 23% increase in child casualties, when compared to the first quarter of 2020.

It said the surge in civilian casualties noted with the start of intra-Afghan negotiations between the government representatives and the Taliban in September last year continued with the insurgents charged for 43.5% of all civilian casualties, security forces for 25% of civilian casualties, and undetermined anti-government elements for 12.5% of the civilian casualties.

UNAMA data also depict an upward trend in civilian casualties, with a slight drop in 2020 when the US and Taliban inked Doha Agreement paving the way for foreign troops to leave Afghanistan.

According to the estimates, 3,133 civilians were killed in 2011, 2,769 more to the raging conflict in 2012, 2,969 deaths in 2013, 3,701 in 2014. This was the time when the foreign troops ended their combat mission and went into the Resolute Support mission focusing mainly on training the Afghan forces.

### The United...

in Iraq supercharged al-Qaeda and ISIS, leading to humanitarian crises in northern Iraq and eastern Syria.

The Failure of Regime Change But even if the US failed miserably on installing new human rights-loving regimes across the region, at least the US's "national interests" are now much safer thanks to regime change. Right? Well, not quite. Although Washington now claims that it is leaving Iraq and Afghanistan on good terms with the local regimes, the fact is that the US is leaving in power a great many enemies who are more than happy to see the US leave. And in many cases, the US strengthened those with an interest in undermining Washington's interests.

In Afghanistan, for example, the anti-US warlords (i.e., Taliban-aligned groups) aren't going away, and are likely to even increase in power as the US leaves. This, after all, is the central claim made by those who oppose Biden's withdrawal plan. The US leaves behind an

Afghanistan where anti-US powers are likely to quickly rush in and fill the power vacuum. Meanwhile, in Iraq, the main "accomplishment" of the removal of Sunni-aligned Saddam Hussein was to grow the power of the Shia minority. This now means the growth of Iran-aligned Shia militias, which are avowedly opposed to the US regime.

In other words, the US could maintain a foothold in both countries indefinitely, but it could only do so through old-fashioned—and very costly—military occupation. That's certainly not what Washington promised twenty years ago.

With all its fanciful promises for fundamentally changing the calculus in the Middle East, the US has not come even close to shifting the balance of power toward the US by creating a new block of pro-US "democracies." Mostly, the US has sown chaos in the region, paved the way for terrorist groups, and reaffirmed support for some of the worst dictators and regimes in the region. All of this was bought and paid for by thousands of US

lives and hundreds of thousands of lives in the invaded countries. And by trillions of US dollars. The last twenty years have been little more than the US regime spinning its wheels, all while condemning millions to a new reality of greater death, disability, and poverty.

It's not over yet, though. The fact some announcements have been made about ending wars doesn't mean they're really over. There's no time frame for the final removal of combat troops from Iraq. In Afghanistan, the US may not be ending the war at all, but only shifting toward a war fought by US-employed mercenaries.

In any case, the global political situation has become expensive and hostile to the point that it now makes sense to at least ostensibly bring these conflicts to an end. Also, now that the average American voter is barely paying attention—and that the US is facing an economic crisis and weak recovery—it has become politically expedient to forget about those old wars, preferably with an eye to starting a new one with Russia.

### Peace or civil...

external forces yet the deadly one on its own soil—the Taliban. It is a great opportunity for Afghanistan as well as Pakistan to come to an agreement with the Taliban to maintain peace and authority in the region without interference from external elements unless some friendly countries like Saudi Arabia or UAE may volunteer to become mediators between the

Afghan Taliban and the Afghan Government. In fact, the above analysis on withdrawal is a true picture of the post-withdrawal scenario. This withdrawal by a world power without a properly strategised plan is aimed to avert any civil war between the warlords, the Afghan Taliban, and the government. The world must not forget the negative role of India in Afghanistan as India may instigate a civil war

between the pro-Indian Taliban and the Afghan government, whereas the US must also keep in mind the past ultra-destructive role of India in Afghanistan.

President Ashraf Ghani needs to unfold his plan and join the negotiation table with the Afghan Taliban to reach out to some mutually agreed solution. Pakistan is always there for its Afghan brothers.

### Media advocates...

The Ministry of Information and Culture, however, assured the media of the government's support following the full withdrawal of foreign forces. Abdul Manan Shewa-e-Sharq, the deputy minister of information and culture stated: "The Information and Culture Ministry will not allow any restrictions on freedom of speech – either now or after the withdrawal." This comes amid ongoing preparations by the US and

NATO to withdraw from Afghanistan by September 11. Meanwhile, CIA Director William Burns reportedly made a surprise visit to Kabul this week to discuss the withdrawal process with Afghan officials. The Associated Press reported Saturday that two credible sources had confirmed the visit. In Washington, the CIA declined to comment when asked by AP about the director's schedule and the agency's role in Afghanistan. However, a senior former Afghan security

official told AP that two of six units trained and run by the CIA to track militants have already been transferred to Afghan control. Two Afghan officials told AP that Burns quietly visited Kabul last weekend. They would not say whom Burns met with, but said some of the discussions addressed Afghanistan's preparedness after the U.S. pullout. Burns also reportedly reassured Afghan officials that the U.S. would continue to be engaged in counterterrorism efforts.

### Exchange Rates

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# Biden, Erdogan To Hold Meeting in June: White House

US President Joe Biden and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan will hold their first bilateral meeting in June, the White House said on Friday. The meeting will take place on the sidelines of the June 14 NATO leader meeting in Brussels, Belgium, and will be used "to discuss the full range of bilateral and regional issues," the White House said after the leaders held a bilateral telephone call.

During the conversation Biden conveyed "his interest in a constructive bilateral relationship with expanded areas of cooperation and effective management of disagreements," it added. The call is the first between Biden and Erdogan since the American president assumed office in January.



### A look at the world

#### ASEAN Leaders' Meeting on Myanmar Begins in Indonesia

The Association of Southeast Asian (ASEAN) leaders has begun a meeting in Indonesia on Saturday to seek a solution to the Myanmar crisis, which has killed more than 700 people since the Feb. 1 military coup.

Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah from Brunei Darussalam, the current chair of the regional bloc, is presiding over the meeting at the office of ASEAN Secretariat in Indonesian capital Jakarta.

Saturday's meeting "consists of three segments, namely ASEAN community development, ASEAN external relations, and regional and international issues," the Indonesian presidency said in a statement.



Among the participants of the meeting are the bloc's Secretary-General Dato Lim Jock Hoi and Myanmar's junta leader Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, as well as Indonesian President Joko Widodo.

Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh, Thai Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai, Philippines Foreign Minister Teodoro Locsin Jr., Laos Foreign Minister Saleumxay Kommasith, and Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen are also attending the meeting.

On Friday, Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi said the meeting was an initiative of the host country and a follow-up to Widodo's talks with Hassanal last month.

At least 745 people have been killed in a military crackdown against anti-coup protesters in Myanmar, according to the latest figures released by a rights watchdog. The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners said in a daily briefing late Friday that 3,371 people are in detention, 79 have been convicted and arrest warrants have been issued for at least 1,118 others.

The violence has continued despite the ASEAN leaders' gathering to discuss the evolving situation.

#### Pakistan Conveys Solidarity As COVID-19 Batters India



Pakistan expressed solidarity with virus-ravaged India on Saturday as the world's second most populous country reels under a devastating COVID-19 wave.

Single-day infections in India hit another global record of 346,786 on Saturday, with the daily death toll at 2,624.

The country's overall tally is now over 16.6 million, including 189,544 fatalities.

A staggering surge in infections has kept India's daily case count over 300,000 since Thursday, pushing the healthcare system to the verge of collapse and causing a crippling shortage of oxygen supply.

"I want to express our solidarity with the people of India as they battle a dangerous wave of COVID-19," Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan said on Twitter.

"Our prayers for a speedy recovery go to all those suffering from the pandemic in our neighborhood and the world. We must fight this global challenge confronting humanity together."

Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Pakistan's foreign minister, also posted a message of support on Twitter.

"We express our support to the people of India in the wake of the current wave of COVID-19 infections, that has hit our region hard. On behalf of the people of Pakistan, I extend our heartfelt sympathies to the affected families in India," he said.

The pandemic, he added, is "yet another reminder that humanitarian issues require responses beyond political consideration." He said Pakistan continues to work with member states of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation – a regional intergovernmental organization – to foster cooperation to tackle the pandemic.

Edhi Foundation, Pakistan's largest humanitarian agency, on Friday offered to send a fleet of 50 ambulances and staff to help in India's fight against the pandemic. New Delhi is yet to respond to the offer.

#### Japan To Host First Joint 'War Games' With US, France

Japan will hold a joint military drill with US and French troops in the country's southwest next month, the defence minister has announced, as China's actions in regional waters raise concern.

The exercise, running from May 11 to 17, will be the first large-scale exercise in Japan involving ground troops from all three countries, the Japanese Ground Self-Defense Force (JGSDF) said in a statement on Friday.

It comes as Tokyo seeks to deepen defence cooperation beyond its key US ally to counter Beijing's growing assertiveness in the East and South China Seas.

"France shares the vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific," Defence Minister Nobuo Kishi told reporters.



"By strengthening cooperation between Japan, the United States and France, we'd like to further improve the tactics and skills of the Self-Defense Forces in defending remote island territories," he said.

Paris has strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific where it has territories, including the French island of Reunion in the Indian Ocean and French Polynesia in the South Pacific.

The joint drills will be held at the JGSDF's Kirishima training ground and Camp Ainoara in the Kyushu region and include amphibious operation exercises.

Threats from China Last week, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga and US President Joe Biden pledged to stand firm together against China and step-up cooperation including on technology.

The two leaders also agreed to oppose any attempts "to change the status quo by force or coercion in the East and South China Seas". Biden's first face-to-face meeting with a foreign leader was also intended to invigorate joint efforts between the US, Japan, Australia and India, an informal alliance known as "the Quad", which the new US administration views as a bulwark against China in the Indo-Pacific. The US has accused China of "destabilising" the region with its construction of artificial islands, as well as naval and air facilities in the South China Sea.



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