

ARMENIA-AZERBAIJAN DISPUTE OVER NAGORNO-KARABAKH

New Russia-backed truce breaks down within hours

REUTERS, Yerevan/Baku

Armenia and Azerbaijan yesterday accused each other of violating a new humanitarian ceasefire in fighting over the mountain enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh, hours after it was agreed.

The truce agreed on Saturday came into force at midnight (2000 GMT) after a week-old Russian-brokered ceasefire failed to halt the worst fighting in the South Caucasus since the 1990s. At least 750 people have been killed since fighting began on Sept. 27.

At 1010 GMT, the Azeri defence ministry said the Aghdam region, adjacent Nagorno-Karabakh, was under Armenian shelling. It said overnight Armenian military units opened fire from large-caliber weapons along the border, which Armenia denied.

Armenia said the Azeri army had fired twice during the night and used artillery and accused Baku of rejecting its request to withdraw the wounded soldiers from the battlefield. Baku called the statement misinformation.

The Azeri defence ministry said: "The enemy fired at the vicinity of the Jabrail city, as well as the villages of this region ...

using mortars and artillery".

The ministry said that Azeri military units downed Armenian Su-25 warplane, "which was attempting to inflict airstrikes on the positions of the Azeri army in Jabrail region." Yerevan swiftly denied that.

Officials in Nagorno-Karabakh said Azeri forces had launched an attack on the enclave's military positions and there were casualties and wounded on both sides.

Nagorno-Karabakh is a mountain territory that is internationally recognised as part of Azerbaijan but populated and governed by ethnic Armenians.

The ceasefire earlier this month was aimed at letting the sides swap detainees and bodies of those killed in the clashes, but it had little impact on the fighting around the enclave.

The new truce was announced on Saturday after Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov talked to his Armenian and Azeri counterparts by phone and called on sides to observe the truce that he mediated a week ago.

Russia, France and the United States belong to the Minsk Group, which has attempted to help resolve the conflict under the umbrella of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).



Military personnel carry a body recovered from the site of a landslide in central Vietnam's Quang Tri province yesterday. A landslide early yesterday killed at least 14 military personnel and left eight missing in central Vietnam, the government said. Intense rainfall since early October has caused the worst flooding for years, with more 80 people killed in central Vietnam.

PHOTO: AFP



Trump hits back at GOP senator after criticism

REUTERS, Washington

US President Donald Trump on Saturday attacked a longtime congressional critic who warned this week that his handling of the coronavirus pandemic and authoritarian leaders could cause a "Republican bloodbath in the Senate" in the Nov 3 elections.

US Senator Ben Sasse is the least effective of the 53 Republican senators, Trump wrote on Twitter, calling him "a liability to the Republican Party, and an embarrassment to the Great State of Nebraska. Other than that, he's just a wonderful guy."

Sasse criticized Trump in a town hall with constituents on Wednesday, and questioned whether the president would ultimately drive the country further to the left.

Trump "kisses dictators' butts" and has "flirted with white supremacists," according to a transcript of the virtual town hall. Trump's leadership through the COVID-19 pandemic has not been "reasonable, or responsible, or right," Sasse said.

He added that Trump refused to take the coronavirus seriously for months and had treated it like a news cycle rather than a multi-year public health challenge.

Senate Republicans are battling to keep their 53-47 majority in the election. Surveys showed Republicans can lose the Senate besides presidency.

CAN POLLS BE TRUSTED THIS YEAR?

In 2016, most of the major surveys said Hillary Clinton winning the race against Donald Trump. Since Trump's victory, a big question mark has been hanging over the reliability of opinion polls. Surveys are again backing Democratic candidate Joe Biden consistently. Can they be believed this time around?

WHAT DO THE POLLS SAY?

With 16 days to go before the November 3 election, Democrat Joe Biden is ahead of the Republican president by 9.0 percentage points nationally, according to polling averages from the RealClearPolitics website. But in the United States, candidates win the White House not through the popular vote, but with the Electoral College. In 2016, Trump lost the popular vote to Hillary Clinton, but won enough states to garner the electoral votes needed to become president. This year, six states are seen as key to winning the White House: Florida, North Carolina, Arizona, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania and Michigan. But if the polls are correct, Biden also has the advantage there, although he is at times within the margin of error, ranging from 1.7 percentage points ahead in Florida to 7.2 in Michigan.

WHERE WERE THE ERRORS IN 2016?

The polls on the eve of the vote correctly predicted a slight national lead for Clinton, but "the place where the polls missed were in some of those Midwest swing states" that Trump eventually won, Chris Jackson of Ipsos Public Affairs told AFP. He said under-representation within polling samples of white residents without college degrees who voted for Trump was among the

causes. Most polling institutes say they've corrected their methodology to preclude such mistakes this time around. Battleground states under-pollled last time have been surveyed much more closely and more often. Beyond that, pollsters note consistency: Since the spring, Biden has been ahead with an average lead which has never fallen below four percentage points. As

US ELECTION 2020



14 DAYS TO GO

a comparison, the Trump-Clinton polling lines crossed twice, signalling an uncertain race. Finally, in a country extremely polarized, there are far fewer undecided voters susceptible of altering the contest at the last minute.

ARE THERE RETICENT TRUMP VOTERS?

Some feel that there are Trump voters reticent to tell pollsters they prefer him given the controversy that surrounds the president. "The polls were

wrong last time, and they're more wrong this time," Trump has said. Trafalgar Group, a polling institute favored by Republicans that seeks to employ a methodology to account for the possibility of reticence, had been one of the few in 2016 to predict Trump winning Pennsylvania and Michigan. This time, however, even they give the advantage to Biden in crucial states such as Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.

DO UNCERTAINTIES REMAIN?

Pollsters and analysts are still careful to note that voters' intentions are not a prediction and that there is still a margin of error. Campaigns can be dynamic, with the last presidential election probably decided in the home stretch. With 16 days to go in 2016, the FiveThirtyEight site gave Clinton an 86 percent chance for victory, nearly the same as Biden now. In the United States, voter registration varies enormously, which makes it especially difficult to predict turnout. Trump points to enthusiastic crowds at his rallies to argue that momentum is on his side, but will that translate at the ballot box? Will Democrats turn out massively to vote for Biden? Those questions can only be answered after November 3 polling day.

SOURCE: AFP

Human trafficking surges amid pandemic: UN

THOMSON REUTERS FOUNDATION, London

Human traffickers are capitalising on the coronavirus pandemic to target people ranging from jobless migrants to out-of-school children, two United Nations specialists said, warning that the fallout from Covid-19 had driven the crime further underground.

The global economic slowdown has left countless people jobless, desperate and at risk of exploitation, while victims of trafficking are less likely to be found or receive help with attention and resources diverted elsewhere, the experts said.

An estimated 25 million people worldwide are victims of labour and sex trafficking, according to the United Nations, with concerns growing that more will fall prey as support services are halted and efforts to secure justice are hindered.

"The difficulty is that trafficking is now even more underground and less visible," said Siobhan Mullally, the recently-appointed UN special rapporteur on human trafficking.

"More people are at risk ... especially in the

informal economy ... there are opportunities for traffickers to recruit, to exploit, to prey on people's desperation," Mullally told the Thomson Reuters Foundation ahead of Anti-Slavery Day on Oct 18.

About 2.5 billion people - more than 60% of the world's workforce - are informal workers, leaving them particularly at risk of being underpaid and abused, labour advocates have said.

From India to Cambodia, workers in sectors such as textiles and tourism have lost their livelihoods due to Covid-19 and resorted to taking out loans that can lead to debt bondage. Many of the world's estimated 164 million migrant workers are stranded abroad and unable to go home or unwilling to seek help due to closed borders and restrictive immigration policies, leaving them vulnerable to traffickers, according to Mullally.

Extreme poverty will rise for the first time this century, the World Bank said last week, predicting that the Covid-19 fallout could spawn 115 million "new poor" this year alone.

BLAST IN AFGHANISTAN

12 killed; more than 100 injured

AFP, Herat

A car bomb targeting an Afghan police headquarters in the western province of Ghor killed at least 12 civilians and wounded more than 100, officials said yesterday.

The attack took place in Feroz Koh, the capital of Ghor, a province that has not seen much violence compared to some other regions of the conflict-racked country.

The ministry of interior said the car bomb detonated in front of Ghor police headquarters at about 11:00 am.

"The terrorists detonated an explosives-filled car... as a result 12 civilians were killed and more than 100 people were wounded," the interior ministry said.

No group has claimed responsibility, but fighting between the Taliban and government has surged in recent weeks.

Peace talks between the Taliban and Afghan government began in Qatar last month, but violence has continued unabated on the ground. The talks appear to be stalled as the Taliban and the Kabul administration have struggled to establish a basic framework for negotiations.

Thai PM seeks talks

Celebrities break silence as protests spread to at least 19 provinces

AGENCIES

Thousands of anti-government protesters took over key intersections in Bangkok yesterday, defying a ban on protests for the fourth day with chants of "down with dictatorship" and "reform the monarchy."

Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, a former junta leader the protesters seek to oust, is concerned about the spreading protests and the government wants to talk, his spokesman said.

Demonstrations have persisted despite the arrest of dozens of protesters and their leaders, the use of water cannon and shutdowns on much of Bangkok's metro rail system in a bid to quell over three months of street action.

Prayuth's spokesman said the prime minister feared the protests, which have spread across the country of 70 million, could be used by troublemakers seeking to instigate violence.

Across Thailand, demonstrations were being organised in at least 19 other provinces yesterday. Solidarity protests were also being held or planned in Taiwan, Denmark, Sweden, France, the United States and Canada.



Meanwhile, Thailand's pro-democracy movement drew attention of influential Thai celebrities, including a K-pop superstar, beauty queens and TV personalities.

Political statements are unusual from Thai celebs, whose lucrative endorsements rely on the billionaire clans that are a pillar of the country's establishment. But some prominent figures broke cover after police fired water cannon at peaceful protesters in

Bangkok on Friday.

Thai-American K-Pop idol Nichkhun, better known as the "Thai Prince", told his 6.9 million Twitter followers he cannot "stand idly by" after Friday's scenes. Amanda Odbam, the newly crowned Miss Universe Thailand, took to Instagram with pictures of a lone protester pushing against riot police wielding their shields. "Your job is to protect the people not harm them," she wrote.



People participate in a nationwide protest against US President Donald Trump's decision to fill the seat on the Supreme Court left by the passing of late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg before the 2020 election, in Washington, US, on Saturday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Iran claims victory as arms embargo expires

AFP, Tehran

Iran said a longstanding UN embargo on arms sales to and from the Islamic republic expired yesterday in line with a 2015 landmark nuclear deal with world powers from which Washington has withdrawn.

Tehran, which could now purchase weapons from Russia, China and elsewhere, has hailed the development as a diplomatic victory over its arch enemy the US, which had tried to maintain an indefinite freeze on arms sales.

"As of today, all restrictions on the transfer of arms, related activities and financial services to and from the Islamic Republic of Iran... are all automatically terminated," the foreign ministry said in a statement.

The embargo on the sale of conventional arms to Iran was due to start expiring progressively from yesterday, October 18, under the terms of the UN resolution that blessed the 2015 nuclear deal between the Islamic republic and world powers.

"As of today, the Islamic Republic may procure any necessary arms and equipment from any source without any legal restrictions, and solely based on its defensive needs," the ministry added in the statement sent out on Twitter. It insisted that under the terms of the deal, struck with the United States, China, Britain, France, Germany and Russia, "the lifting of arms restrictions and the travel ban were designed to be automatic with no other action required."

Washington suffered a setback in August when it failed to win support from the UN Security Council to indefinitely extend the arms embargo.

It was "a momentous day for the international community," the Iranian ministry said yesterday, adding the world had stood with Tehran "in defiance of the US regime's efforts". But it stressed that "unconventional arms, weapons of mass destruction and a buying spree of conventional arms have no place in Iran's defense doctrine".

NEWS IN BRIEF

Coronavirus survives on skin for 9 hours: study

The coronavirus remains active on human skin for nine hours, Japanese researchers have found, in a discovery they said showed the need for frequent hand washing to combat the Covid-19 pandemic. The pathogen that causes the flu survives on human skin for about 1.8 hours by comparison, said the study published this month in the Clinical Infectious Diseases journal. Both the coronavirus and the flu virus are inactivated within 15 seconds by applying ethanol, which is used in hand sanitisers. The study backs WHO guidance for regular and thorough hand washing to limit transmission of the virus, which has infected nearly 40 million people around the world since it first emerged in China late last year.

India successfully test-fires supersonic cruise missile

India yesterday successfully test-fired its supersonic cruise missile BrahMos, developed jointly with Russia, from the Indian Navy's indigenously-built stealth destroyer, hitting a target in the Arabian Sea. The missile, fired from the warship INS Chennai, "hit the target successfully with pin-point accuracy after performing high-level and extremely complex manoeuvres," the Indian Defence Ministry said in a statement. "BrahMos as the 'prime strike weapon' will ensure the warship's invincibility by engaging naval surface targets at longer ranges, thus making the destroyer another lethal platform of the Indian Navy," it said.

Israel and Bahrain to formalise diplomatic ties

Israel and Bahrain were scheduled to officially establish diplomatic relations yesterday at a ceremony in Manama, an Israeli official said. An Israeli delegation led by National Security Council chief Meir Ben Sabbat took off from Tel Aviv for a one-day trip to Manama that will see Israel and Bahrain formalise the agreement they signed at the White House on September 15. After the ceremony, Israel and Bahrain will be free to open embassies in each other's countries, the official said. The UAE and Bahrain became the third and fourth Arab states to agree to normalise ties with Israel, following Egypt's peace deal with Israel in 1979 and a 1994 pact with Jordan.

Arden vows to deliver reform

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Arden yesterday vowed to "crack on" with delivering her vision following a landslide election victory, after a string of disasters frustrated reform in her first term. Arden won a historic outright majority in Saturday's poll -- the first since New Zealand adopted proportional voting in 1996 -- allowing her to implement policies without support from minor parties. After facing criticism since winning office in 2017 for not delivering on key promises such as protecting the environment and reducing child poverty, Arden said she now had a mandate for change.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS