

UNREST IN THAILAND
18 hurt as cops fire tear gas, water cannon

REUTERS, BANGKOK

Thai police fired water cannon and teargas at protesters marching on parliament yesterday, and at least 18 people were hurt in the most violent confrontation since a youth-led protest movement emerged in July.

The protests have become the biggest challenge to Thailand's establishment in years.

Demonstrators converged on parliament to put pressure on lawmakers discussing changes to the constitution. Protesters also want the removal of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, a former army ruler, and to curb the powers of King Maha Vajiralongkorn.

Protesters have said they do not want to abolish the monarchy. Police sprayed water cannon at protesters who cut through razor-wire barricades and removed concrete barriers outside parliament. Officers then fired teargas. Thousands of protesters gathered at different points and the number grew into the evening.

Government spokesman Anucha Burapachaisri said police had been obliged to act to keep parliamentarians safe.

Lawmakers were discussing several proposals for constitutional changes, some of which would exclude the possibility of altering the monarchy's role.

There is also discussion of the role of the upper house Senate, which was entirely selected by Prayuth's former junta and helped ensure that he kept power with a parliamentary majority after last year's disputed vote.

Some protesters scuffled with dozens of yellow-shirted royalists who had remained behind after an earlier demonstration by hundreds of right-wing Thais calling on lawmakers not to make changes to the constitution.



Demonstrators use inflatable rubber ducks as shields to protect themselves from water cannons during an anti-government protest as lawmakers debate on constitution change, outside the parliament in Bangkok, Thailand, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Trump asked for options for attacking Iran last week: NYT

REUTERS, Washington

Any attack by the United States against Iran would face a "crushing" response, an Iranian government spokesman has said, following a report that President Donald Trump last week asked for options for attacking Iran's main nuclear site. "Any action against the Iranian nation would certainly face a crushing response," Ali Rabiei yesterday said in remarks streamed on an official government website, according to the Reuters news agency.

On Monday, the New York Times reported that Trump had asked his close aides what "options were available" to take action against Iran's key nuclear site in a meeting last week.

But his advisers warned such a move during his last weeks in office could escalate into a bigger conflict, the Times reported.

The meeting on Thursday took place shortly after inspectors reported a significant increase in Iran's stockpile of nuclear material, the report said, citing four current and former US officials.

"Mr Trump asked his top national security aides what options were available and how to respond," the newspaper reported, citing officials.

The report said the attack would have likely targeted Natanz, the centrepiece of Iran's enrichment programme, which Tehran says is only for peaceful purposes.

Last week, the United Nation's International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said Iran had stockpiled low-enriched uranium 12 times more than the limit set by a nuclear accord.

The Iranian government began scaling back a number of its JCPOA commitments following Trump's decision to unilaterally withdraw the US from the accord in 2018.

Officials familiar with the matter later said Trump might "still be looking at ways to strike Iranian assets and allies, including militias in Iraq".

SECOND WAVE OF CORONAVIRUS

US, Europe plan vaccination schemes

AFP, Washington

Plans for vaccination programmes began taking shape in Europe and the United States following recent breakthroughs, as surging coronavirus caseloads prompted gruelling new restrictions, with Austria taking the unpopular step yesterday of closing schools and shops.

Global hopes of vanquishing the coronavirus pandemic were high after US biotech firm Moderna said its vaccine candidate was nearly 95 percent effective in a trial, a week after similar results announced by pharma giant Pfizer and its German partner BioNTech.

Top US infectious disease expert Anthony Fauci hailed the results, telling AFP that the data exceeded expectations. "The idea that we have a 94.5 percent effective vaccine is stunningly impressive," he said.

Moderna, whose clinical trial involved more than 30,000 participants, expects to have approximately 20 million doses ready to ship in the United States by year-end -- with elderly and at-risk people to be first in line for jabs.

The US Food and Drug Agency may approve both the Moderna and Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines early next month, according to Moncef Slaoui, head of the government's "Operation Warp Speed" vaccine quest. He said that from January, 25 million people

would be vaccinated per month. France too said it was "getting on the starting blocks" for a vaccination programme to launch in January pending French and EU regulatory approval, budgeting 1.5 billion euros (\$1.8 billion) for the rollout in 2021, according to spokesman Gabriel Attal.



Fauci, who heads the National Institutes of Allergies and Infectious Diseases, warned it would be crucial to convince people to take the vaccine, particularly in the US, where anti-vaccine sentiment runs high.

Yet with widespread availability of any vaccine still far off, restrictions on free movement, gatherings and business were inevitable as the second wave of the

coronavirus continued to build. Globally, infections have surpassed 55 million with more than 1.3 million deaths, and experts caution the months ahead will still be difficult and dangerous.

Curbs have returned in Europe -- often in the face of protests -- from Greece to Britain, where Covid-19 survivor Prime Minister Boris Johnson was self-isolating after coming into contact with an MP who later tested positive for the virus.

Sweden, which has drawn attention for a softer approach to combating the virus, decided to ban gatherings of more than eight people for the first time. Bucking the trend in Europe, Russia has not imposed a new nationwide lockdown, even as it reported a record high 442 new coronavirus-related deaths yesterday.

Infections in the United States, meanwhile, show no sign of relenting after one million new cases in less than a week pushed the total number to 11,206,054 with 247,229 deaths.

The spikes have prompted new curbs in various states, while experts warn families against large gatherings for the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday.

A stay-at-home advisory came into force Monday in the country's third-biggest city, Chicago; while New York, an earlier outbreak epicentre, was also trying to flatten a second curve.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Islamists say Pakistan agrees to French boycott, end protest

A Pakistani Islamist group called off protests over defamatory cartoons to Muslims yesterday saying the government had agreed to their demand for a boycott of French products, the group's spokesman said. Thousands of Islamists had clashed with police on the edge of the capital, Islamabad, on Monday in protests over the recent display of the cartoons in France.

"We are calling off our protests after the government signed an agreement that it will officially endorse boycotting French products," Ejaz Ashrafi, a spokesman for the Tehrik-i-Labaik group, told Reuters by telephone. The government spokesman was not immediately available for comment on the agreement, which, according to a copy provided by the group and seen by Reuters, was signed by two ministers, a top official and the group's leaders.

Putin approves naval facility in Sudan

President Vladimir Putin on Monday approved the creation of a Russian naval facility in Sudan capable of mooring nuclear-powered surface vessels, clearing the way for Moscow's first substantial military foothold in Africa since the Soviet fall. The new facility, earmarked to be built in the vicinity of Port Sudan, will be capable of accommodating up to 300 military and civilian personnel and improve Russia's ability to operate in the Indian Ocean, expanding its influence in Africa. Putin presided over a flagship Russia-Africa summit last year, an event designed to increase Russian sway on the continent, and two nuclear-capable Russian bombers landed in South Africa at the same time in a show of intent. Putin, in a decree published on Monday, said he had approved a Russian government proposal to set up a naval logistics hub in Sudan and ordered the defence ministry to sign an agreement to make it happen.

Europe, US need to work together on Turkey: Pompeo

The US administration and Europe need to work jointly on addressing actions led by Turkey in the Middle East over the past few months, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told French daily newspaper Le Figaro. "France's president Emmanuel Macron and I agree that Turkey's recent actions have been very aggressive," Pompeo said, citing Turkey's recent support to Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Armenia as well as military moves in Libya and the Mediterranean. "Europe and the US must work together to convince Erdogan such actions are not in the interest of his people," Pompeo said, referring to Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan. Pompeo said increased use of Turkey's military capability was a concern, but he did not say whether the country, which hosts US military forces at its Incirlik Air Base, should stay in or quit the North Atlantic Alliance.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

'In the hands of God'

Hurricane Iota smashes into Central America

REUTERS, Puerto Cabezas

Hurricane Iota sent zinc roofing flying into the streets, toppled electricity poles and felled palm trees as it battered northeastern Nicaragua yesterday, the second giant storm to strike Central America this month.

Iota hit Nicaragua late on Monday, blowing sustained winds of nearly 249 kph. By 6 am (1200 GMT), its winds had fallen to 85 mph (137 kph) as it moved inland, the National Hurricane Center (NHC) said.

The port of Puerto Cabezas, still partly flooded and strewn with debris from the force of Hurricane Eta two weeks ago, again bore the brunt of the storm. Frightened residents huddled in shelters and worried about food and their lives.

"We could die," said one, Inocencia Smith. "There is nothing to eat at all," she added, noting that the area's farms were wrecked by Eta.

The wind tore the roof off a makeshift hospital. Patients were evacuated, including two women who gave birth during the first rains of the storm on Monday, and others in intensive care, Vice President Rosario Murillo told a news conference.

About 40,000 people in Nicaragua have

been evacuated to shelters, authorities said. Many coastal areas are at risk of storm surges of as much as 20 feet (6 meters) above normal tides. In Honduras, 80,000 people were moved to safety.

"It's the strongest hurricane that has touched Nicaraguan soil since records began," said Marcio Baca, director of the Nicaraguan Institute of Earth Studies.

This is the first time two major hurricanes have formed in the Atlantic basin in November since records began in 1851. Iota was also the first category 5 storm of the hurricane season before losing a little wind speed off the coast to reach land.

Even after weakening, Iota's rain - with up to 30 inches expected - could cause landslides and more flooding across the water-logged region, the NHC warned.

Eta devastated crops and washed away hillsides two weeks ago, killing dozens.

"We are in the hands of God," said Jaime Caal Cuz, 53, a farmer in Guatemala's southeastern province of Izabal. After taking his family to a shelter, he stayed to guard the house and their belongings.

"We don't have food, but we are going to wait here for the hurricane that we're asking God to stop from coming," he said.



This Nasa TV video grab shows Nasa's SpaceX Crew-1 mission aboard the SpaceX Crew Dragon (L) docked to the International Space Station (R). Four astronauts were successfully launched on the SpaceX Crew Dragon "Resilience" to the International Space Station on November 15, the first of what the US hopes will be many routine missions following a successful test flight in late spring.

PHOTO: AFP



Yoshihide Suga, Japan's prime minister bumps elbows with Scott Morrison, Australia's prime minister, during a joint news conference at Suga's official residence in Tokyo, Japan, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Japan, Australia agree defence pact

REUTERS, Tokyo

Japan and Australia agreed a breakthrough defence pact yesterday facilitating reciprocal visits for training and operations.

The Reciprocal Access Agreement strengthens defence ties between the two US allies at a time when China is asserting its role in the region and the United States is going through a leadership transition. The countries have been negotiating the defence deal for six years.

A legal framework allowing Japanese and Australian troops to visit each other's countries and conduct training and joint operations, it was agreed in principle by Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga and his Australian counterpart, Scott Morrison, who is visiting Tokyo.

"In the Indo-Pacific region, security and defence cooperation between Japan and Australia, which have the will and capacity to contribute to regional peace and stability, is becoming increasingly important," Suga told a joint news conference.

It will be Japan's first agreement covering foreign military presence on its soil since a status of forces agreement in 1960 that allowed the United States to base warships, fighter jets and thousands of troops in and around Japan as part of an alliance that Washington describes as the bedrock of regional security.

UK PM: Devolving powers to Scotland was 'a disaster'

REUTERS, London

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson called the devolution of powers to Scotland "a disaster", a comment that played into the hands of Scottish nationalists pushing for an independence referendum that opinion polls suggest they could win.

The bonds holding the United Kingdom together have been severely strained over the last five years by Brexit and the government's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, and 14 recent polls have shown a majority of Scots now support independence.

In a video call on Friday with northern English lawmakers from his Conservative Party, Johnson said that devolution, introduced by Tony Blair had been the former prime minister's "biggest mistake" and "a disaster", media reported.

He also said he saw no case for giving Scotland's semi-autonomous government and parliament, which are dominated by

the pro-independence Scottish National Party (SNP), any further powers in addition to the ones they hold now.

Johnson's office did not deny the comments.

Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, the SNP leader, jumped on them, arguing that the Conservatives' public statements of support for devolution were duplicitous.

"Worth bookmarking these PM comments for the next time Tories say they're not a threat to the powers of the Scottish Parliament - or, even more incredibly, that they support devolving more powers," she said on Twitter. Independence is the only way to protect and strengthen the Scottish parliament, she added.

Scottish voters rejected independence by 55 to 45 percent in a 2014 referendum, but since then the SNP have become stronger, winning all elections in Scotland by huge margins.

