

TENSIONS OVER INDIA'S KASHMIR MOVE

Pakistan denies use of airspace to India president

Doval says lifting of restrictions 'depends on Pakistan'

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan yesterday said it had denied India's President Ram Nath Kovind permission to fly through its airspace -- access to which is usually granted -- due to New Delhi's recent "behaviour".

The decision comes at a time of high tension between the two nuclear-armed South Asian neighbours over the disputed Himalayan region of Kashmir.

"The Indian President had sought permission to use Pakistan's airspace to travel to Iceland, but we decided not to permit him," Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi said in a statement.

Pakistan had closed its airspace to Indian traffic in February after a suicide bomb attack killed dozens of Indian troops in Kashmir ratcheted up tensions between the two neighbours and prompted tit-for-tat aerial dogfights.

It reopened its skies for all civilian traffic in July, ending months of restrictions that had affected major international routes.

Meanwhile, India's national security advisor yesterday said lifting of New Delhi's communications restrictions in Indian

Kashmir depends on Pakistan.

More than 200 suspected militants are trying to cross into Indian Kashmir from Pakistan, Ajit Kumar Doval said, accusing Islamabad of trying to stoke violence in the region.

Pakistan condemned India's decision last month to revoke the constitutional autonomy of Kashmir and Prime Minister Imran Khan on Friday vowed the fullest possible response to India's actions in the disputed territory.

"There are about 230 persons ready to infiltrate from different parts of Kashmir," Ajit Doval told reporters.

"A large number of weapons are being smuggled and people in Kashmir are being told to create trouble," said Doval, who is considered one of the architects of the policy to withdraw Kashmir's special status and integrate it fully into India.

India imposed a clampdown in India Kashmir in early August to prevent large scale violent protests. Some curbs have been eased, but mobile phone and internet services are still curtailed because they may be used to spark unrest, Doval said.



Ram Nath Kovind



The brother of Palestinian teenager Ali Al-Ashqar, 17, mourns during his funeral in the northern Gaza Strip, yesterday. Two Palestinian teenagers were killed by Israeli fire in renewed clashes along the Gaza border late on Friday. In a separate incident yesterday, Israeli forces attacked Hamas positions in Gaza after rockets fired from the Palestinian enclave hit the Jewish state. No casualties were reported.

PHOTO: AFP

AMAZON FIRES

7 countries meet to boost protection

AFP, Leticia

Presidents and ministers from seven Amazon countries met in Colombia on Friday to agree on measures to protect the world's biggest rainforest, under threat from wildfires and rampant deforestation.

The summit took place in the wake of an international outcry over months of raging fires that have devastated swaths of the Amazon in Brazil and Bolivia.

The gathering aimed "to foster a space for regional dialogue to advance the protection and sustainable use of this region, which is essential for the survival of the planet," Colombia's President Ivan Duque said.

Duque inaugurated the meeting in a "maloka" -- an indigenous hut -- surrounded by members of the Tikuna tribe with headdresses of colored feathers in southern Colombia's Amazon city of Leticia.

Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro, widely criticized over policies that favor deforestation and a delayed reaction to the wildfires, did not travel to Leticia, citing doctors' orders.

However, speaking by videoconference, he urged other leaders to resist calls, spearheaded by French President Emmanuel Macron, to internationalize protection of the Amazon.

The representatives of the seven nations signed the "Leticia Pact for the Amazon" that Duque said would provide greater protection for the rainforest, as existing treaties had "fallen short."

The pact establishes a roadmap for safeguarding the rainforest "not only for the Amazon countries but also the nations of the region and the international community," he said.

Colombia's Environment Minister Ricardo Lozano said the new measures include the establishment of an "Amazonian cooperation network" to share information on deforestation, including weather data to mitigate the effects of climate change, and threats from illegal mining and logging.

Time running out to save nuke deal

Warns Iran as it activates advanced centrifuges breaching 2015 accord

AGENCIES

Iran yesterday said it was now capable of raising uranium enrichment past the 20% level and had launched advanced centrifuge machines in further breaches of commitments to limit its nuclear activity under a 2015 deal with world powers.

"We have started lifting limitations on our Research and Development imposed by the deal ... It will include development of more rapid and advanced centrifuges," Iranian nuclear agency spokesman Behrouz Kamalvandi told a televised news conference.

The 2015 pact curbed Iran's disputed nuclear programme in exchange for relief from sanctions, but has unravelled since the United States pulled out of it last year and acted to strangle Iran's oil trade to push it into wider security concessions.

Since May, Iran has begun to exceed limits on its nuclear capacity set by the pact in retaliation for US pressure on Iran to negotiate restrictions on its ballistic missile programme and support for proxy forces around the Middle East.

Iran says its measures are reversible if European signatories to the accord manage to restore its access to foreign trade promised under the nuclear deal but blocked by the reimposition of US sanctions.

The deal capped the level of purity to which Iran can enrich uranium at 3.67 percent - suitable for civilian power generation and far below the

90% threshold of nuclear weapons grade.

UN nuclear inspectors reported in July that Iran had cranked up enrichment to 4.5% purity. Kamalvandi said Tehran could now exceed the 20% level, a significant leap towards the critical 90%, "but right now there is no need for that".

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He added, however: "European parties to the deal should know that there is not much time left, and if there is some action to be taken (to rescue the pact), it should be done quickly."

Kamalvandi stressed that IAEA inspectors retained full and regular access to Iran's nuclear

installations and again denied that Tehran seeking to develop nuclear weapons. Acting IAEA chief Cornel Feruta was due in Tehran to meet Iranian officials today.

US Defence Secretary Mark Esper said he was "not surprised that Iran has announced that it's going to violate the JCPOA".

Britain called Iran's move "particularly disappointing at a time when we and our European and international partners are working hard to de-escalate tensions".

Meanwhile, US national security advisor John Bolton said that the Iranian oil tanker Adrian Darya 1, blacklisted by Washington, has arrived in the Syrian port of Tartus.

The Adrian Darya 1 had been held for six weeks by the British overseas territory of Gibraltar on suspicion it was set to deliver oil from Iran to its main Arab ally Syria -- a violation of European Union sanctions on President Bashar al-Assad's iron-fisted regime. Gibraltar released the ship, formerly called the Grace 1, on August 18 despite US protests.

In another development, Iran yesterday seized a boat and arrested 12 Filipinos as it busted a "fuel-smuggling ring" in the Strait of Hormuz.

"A foreign tugboat was confiscated as well as 283,900 litres of petrol worth about \$2 million," ISNA said, citing the coast guard chief in the southern province of Hormozgan.

Russia, Ukraine swap prisoners

AFP, Kiev

Russia and Ukraine carried out a long-awaited swap of 70 prisoners yesterday, in a deal hailed by President Volodymyr Zelensky as a "first step" towards ending their conflict.

Planes carrying 35 prisoners from each side landed simultaneously in Moscow and Kiev, where relatives waiting at the airport broke into applause.

"We have taken the first step," Zelensky said on the tarmac after greeting and hugging former prisoners at the airport. "We have to take all the steps to finish this horrible war."

Among those swapped were 24 Ukrainian sailors, Ukrainian filmmaker Oleg Sentsov and Russian journalist Kyrlo Vyshynsky.

Ukraine's SBU security service confirmed that Vladimir Tsemakh, a fighter with Russian-backed separatists considered a key witness in the downing of flight MH17, was also released as part of the swap.

Anticipation had been building for days for the exchange, which involved weeks of behind-the-scenes negotiations.

Relations between Kiev and Moscow nose-dived in 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea and Moscow backed separatists in the eastern industrial regions of Donetsk and Lugansk. Fighting there has claimed more than 13,000 lives over the past five years.

US President Donald Trump hailed the prisoner swap as perhaps 'first giant step to peace'. France's foreign minister also welcomed, while urging "concrete new advances" by each side to end their five-year conflict.

Parts of Wikipedia offline after 'malicious' attack

Popular online reference website Wikipedia went down in several countries after the website was targeted by what it described as a "malicious attack". The server of the Wikimedia Foundation, which hosts the site, suffered a "massive" Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attack, the organization's German account said in a tweet late Friday. In a separate statement the Wikimedia Foundation said that the attack on the encyclopedia -- one of the world's most popular websites -- was "ongoing" and teams were working to restore access. DDoS attacks often involve legions of zombie computers -- machines infected with viruses and commanded to simultaneously visit a website. Such a massive onslaught of demand can overwhelm website computer servers, slowing service or knocking them offline.

5 dead in US from vaping-related lung disease

At least five people have died in the United States after vaping, officials said Friday, in an outbreak that has sickened hundreds with severe pulmonary disease and left several teens in induced comas. Federal officials said that no single substance has been found to be present in all the laboratory samples being examined, however investigators in New York said they were now focusing on black market cannabis e-cigarette products containing vitamin E oil. On Friday, local health authorities in California and Minnesota announced the vaping-related deaths of two individuals, both older and in relatively poor health, at least one of whom had used products containing THC, the principal psychoactive compound in cannabis.

Dorian toll climbs to 43



The death toll from Hurricane Dorian's devastating rampage across the Bahamas rose to 43 and was likely to climb "significantly," officials said, with hundreds missing even as rescuers plucked desperate survivors from the debris. Thousands of people were left homeless on Grand Bahama and Abaco and many were becoming frustrated with the speed of relief and evacuation efforts. Dorian made landfall meanwhile in the United States as a Category 1 hurricane packing winds of nearly 90 miles per hour (150 kilometers per hour). Flooding was reported in the town of Ocracoke to the southwest of Cape Hatteras in North Carolina. Some flooding occurred in the historic city of Charleston, South Carolina, and tens of thousands of residents lost electricity but no major damage was reported.

SOURCE: AFP



Greta Thunberg (C) joins activist outside the United Nations during a protest against climate change in New York yesterday.

PHILIPPINES PEACE DEAL

Muslim rebels start handing over guns

AFP, Sultan Kudarat

Muslim rebels in the mainly Catholic Philippines began handing over their guns to independent foreign monitors yesterday, as part of a peace treaty aimed at ending a decades-long separatist insurgency that has left about 150,000 people dead.

Just over a thousand guerrillas in the country's restive south are turning in 940 weapons in a single day, in a graduated decommissioning process that aims to turn the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the country's largest rebel force, into a regular political party.

The fighters demobilised yesterday represent a symbolic first step towards retiring what MILF says is a force of 40,000 fighters in the coming years.

But the disarmament will take time to make an impact in a place where violence is an almost daily threat.

About a third of MILF combatants and their weapons are to be retired over the coming eight months in the first phase of the decommissioning process. Each retired fighter will receive a million pesos' (about \$19,000) worth of cash, scholarships, health insurance, and training to become productive civilians.

Rebels facing criminal cases related to the insurgency will be granted amnesty, while those qualified can train to become a soldier or a police officer, Duterte's peace adviser Carlito Galvez told reporters.

Brexit bill passes UK upper house in blow for Johnson

AFP, London

Britain's upper house has given final approval to a law that would force Boris Johnson to delay Brexit, in a fresh setback for the British Prime Minister who is struggling in his bid to call an early election.

The draft, which now requires formal assent by Queen Elizabeth II to become law, would seek to postpone Brexit beyond the current deadline of October 31 if Johnson does not manage to strike a divorce agreement with the EU next month.

Johnson, who has said he would rather be "dead in a ditch" than ask for a delay, wants an early general election that could give him a mandate to take Britain out of the European Union with or without a divorce deal.

Johnson received a boost when the High Court in London rejected a legal challenge against his decision to suspend parliament from next week.

But it granted permission for the case to go to the Supreme Court for an appeal scheduled for September 17.

Johnson has branded the bill a "surrender" that would allow the other 27 EU leaders to dictate the terms on which Britain leaves its closest neighbours after 46 years.

He sacked 21 Conservative rebels who voted for the legislation in the House of Commons on Tuesday.

The decision left him without a working majority in parliament.

Johnson's opponents are now widely expected to block for the second time tomorrow his attempt to schedule snap polls for October 15.

The main opposition Labour Party is planning a strategy with smaller groups that could leave Johnson with no other alternative but to resign. They are reportedly trying to make sure that an election is held only after Johnson is forced to go back on his word and seek a divorce deal.

This would happen if no new agreement is reached when Johnson attends an October 17-18 EU leaders' summit in Brussels. None is expected and EU officials say they have heard no new proposals from Johnson's team.

Riot police deployment thwarts HK airport protest

AFP, Hong Kong

Riot police fanned out across Hong Kong yesterday and thwarted plans by pro-democracy protesters to target the airport, days after the city's leader made a surprise concession which was rejected by the movement as too little, too late.

Millions of pro-democracy supporters have taken to Hong Kong's streets for the past three months in the biggest challenge to China's rule since the city's handover from Britain in 1997.

On Wednesday, the city's pro-Beijing leader Carrie Lam surprised many by announcing she was scrapping a hugely unpopular extradition law that sparked the widespread and sometimes violent rallies.

The withdrawal was one of the protesters' key demands and both she and Beijing had previously refused to budge on the issue.

portrayed the move as a bid to de-escalate tensions and start a dialogue.

But it has been widely dismissed by protesters as an empty gesture after 14 weeks of clashes with more than 1,100 arrests and many facing lengthy jail sentences.

Online messaging forums used by the largely leaderless movement had called for protesters to "stress test" the airport yesterday afternoon, filling up with suggestions for how to disrupt the road and rail links leading to the terminals.

But a large deployment of police at key bus, ferry and rail terminals across the city appeared to deter protesters from arriving en masse.

Tao Tsz Fung, 26, managed to get through the security checks and made it to the airport, along with a few dozen more protesters hanging around outside the terminal.

"There are just too many police around," he told AFP. "But we'll be out again tomorrow."

