

A SURGE IN PROTESTS AROUND THE WORLD

The past weeks have seen a wave of protest movements erupt in countries worldwide. Here is an overview of the main demonstrations that started this month and others that are ongoing.

BOLIVIA: Protests raging since October 21.

Trigger? The disputed results of the October 20 presidential election which gave leader Evo Morales victory for a fourth term.

State of play? There has been violence in several regions and a general strike was launched on October 23. Several people have been injured in clashes between supporters and opponents of Morales.

CHILE: Protests raging since October 18.

Trigger? An increase in the price of metro tickets in the capital. **State of play?** President Sebastian Pinera suspended the price hike and then announced social measures such as increased pensions and lower electricity costs. But the protests spread, including complaints about living costs and social inequality. A general strike started on October 23. 18 dead.

LEBANON: Protests raging since October 17.

Trigger? A proposed tax on calls made through messaging apps.

State of play? The government of Saad Hariri quickly axed the measure and announced emergency economic reforms. But the protests have widened to demand the removal of the entire political class. Peaceful protests, marked by several clashes, have paralysed the country but there have been no injuries.

GUINEA: Protests raging since October 7.

Trigger? Accusations that President Alpha Conde is trying to circumvent a bar on a third term in office.

State of play? Thousands of people have joined a string of demonstrations organised by an alliance of opposition groups. Around 10 protesters killed.

ECUADOR: Protests raged till October 1 to 13.

Trigger? The scrapping of fuel subsidies.

State of play? After 12 days of protests, President Lenin Moreno and the indigenous movement, which has spearheaded the demonstrations, reached an agreement under which the government reinstated fuel subsidies. Eight killed and 1,340 injured.

IRAQ: Protests raging since October 1.



In this aerial view thousands of people protest in Santiago, on Friday, a week after protests started over living costs and social inequality. More than one million people took to the streets in Chile Friday demanding economic reforms and the resignation of President Sebastian Pinera. The leader told the thronging masses that he had "heard the message" in a post on Twitter, characterizing the protests in a positive light and as a means towards change.

PHOTO: AFP



Trigger? Spontaneous calls on social media to protest corruption, unemployment and poor public services.

State of play? After a week of protests that quickly escalated into clashes with security forces, the government announced reforms. Protesters continue to demand an end to corruption and unemployment, and an overhaul of the political system. On October 25 the protests resumed. More than 150 dead the first week. At least 40 on Friday alone.

HONG KONG: Protests raging since June 9 in response to a draft government bill that would allow extradition to mainland China. After months of regular demonstrations, the extradition bill was withdrawn in September. But the campaign had already broadened to demand greater democratic freedoms. Initially peaceful, the protests have degenerated into violent clashes between protesters and security forces. Numerous pro-democracy activists have been attacked, and on October 1 police shot and wounded a protester with a live bullet.

ALGERIA: Protests raging since February 22 when President Abdelaziz Bouteflika announced to run for a fifth term. Bouteflika resigned in April but protesters continue to demand an overhaul of the entire political establishment. The opposition rejects elections under the current establishment, called for December 12.

PHOTO: AFP

US's goal in Syria: protecting oil

AFP, Washington

After abruptly pulling US troops who protected Kurdish fighters, President Donald Trump has identified protecting oil as the new goal in Syria. But experts question if the new strategy is realistic, or even legal.

Defense Secretary Mark Esper said Friday that US troops were reinforcing their positions, including with mechanized forces, in Deir Ezzor in northern Syria.

Their mission will be to prevent the Islamic State group from gaining access to oil fields and securing "resources that may allow them to strike within the region, to strike Europe, to strike the United States," Esper told reporters on a visit to Brussels.

Trump on October 6 said that some 1,000 US troops were leaving northeast Syria where they had kept an uneasy peace between neighboring Turkey and Kurdish fighters, who had lost thousands as they led the Western-backed operation that crushed the Islamic

State group.

Trump vowed to get the United States out of "endless" wars -- with Russia filling the void -- and said that US troops were not there to protect the Kurdish fighters, whom Turkey links to separatists at home.

But Trump said Wednesday that a "small number" of US troops would stay to secure the oil.

"We want to keep the oil, and we'll work something out with the Kurds," Trump said.

The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces -- who withdrew from a border area after a Turkish offensive made possible by Trump's pullout -- still control the Deir Ezzor oil fields east of the Euphrates River near the Iraqi border.

But in guarding the oil, the United States has sharply changed its rationale for why it remains in Syria against the will of President Bashar al-Assad, who has largely won a brutal eight-year civil war.

"This move would be a radical shift from the United States'

longstanding focus on defeating ISIS's territorial caliphate and preventing ISIS from re-emerging in Syria and it would instead signal that the Trump team has a larger, geopolitical objective in Syria," said Nicholas Heras, a fellow at the Center for a New American Security.

The United States would effectively be holding Syria's oil resources hostage as it pushes Assad and his Russian backers to accept US ideas for a post-war settlement, he said.

"America's mission in Syria is morphing from a noble battle against the most reviled terrorist organization in the world into a quixotic gambit to force changes in Assad's behavior by taking Syria's oil," Heras said.

Trump, who has mused in the past that the United States should have seized Iraq's oil after the 2003 invasion, said Monday that Washington wanted to keep Syria's fields.

"Maybe we'll have one of our big

oil companies to go in and do it properly," Trump said.

Brett McGurk, the US envoy who built the coalition to fight the Islamic State group until he resigned in protest in December, said that seizing Syrian oil would be illegal.

"Like it or not but it's owned by the Syrian SYP," McGurk said, referring to the state-owned Syrian Petroleum Company.

An estimated 200 US troops are deployed with the Syrian Democratic Forces in Deir Ezzor.

But the number could prove insufficient if Russia tries to seize the zone, as it attempted in early 2018. Some 200 pro-Russian mercenaries were believed to have been killed in a coalition strike as the fighters tried to seize a post of the Syrian Democratic Forces where US troops were present.

This time around, the operation could end quite differently. Abandoned by the United States, the Kurdish fighters have allied with Moscow.



Iraqi protesters gather on the capital Baghdad's Al-Jumhuriyah Bridge yesterday, during an anti-government protest. Iraqi security forces fired tear gas to clear lingering protesters in Baghdad this morning, a day after 42 people died in a bloody resumption of anti-government rallies to be discussed in parliament.

PHOTO: AFP

VIOLENCE IN ETHIOPIA

67 killed in anti-Abiy protests, ethnic clashes

AFP, Addis Ababa

Violence in Ethiopia that began with protests against Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and quickly morphed into ethnic clashes has left 67 people dead in Oromia state, a police official said Friday.

The spike in the death toll came as the high-profile activist at the centre of the violence accused Abiy, this year's Nobel Peace Prize laureate, of acting like a dictator and suggesting he might challenge him in elections planned for next year.

"The total number dead in Oromia is 67," said Kefyalew Tefera, the regional police chief, adding that five of the dead were police officers.

Violence erupted in Addis Ababa, the capital, and in much of Ethiopia's Oromia region on Wednesday after the activist, Jawar Mohammed, accused security forces of trying to orchestrate an attack against him -- a claim police officials denied.

Kefyalew told AFP that the violence had ended in Oromia but Amnesty International researcher Fisseha Tekle said late Friday that he was still receiving reports of attacks.

Jawar is credited with promoting protests that swept Abiy to power last year but he has recently become critical of some of the PM's policies.

In an interview, Jawar told AFP that Abiy -- named Nobel Peace laureate two weeks ago -- seemed to be taking Ethiopia back to "the old ways" of authoritarian rule. "He has resorted to the early signs of dictatorship, of trying to intimidate people, even his very close allies who helped him come to power who happen to disagree with some of the policies and positions and ideologies he's advocating," Jawar said.

Both men are members of the Oromo ethnic group, Ethiopia's largest.

'20 Vietnamese' among dead

AFP, Nghe An

As many as 20 Vietnamese citizens are feared among 39 people found dead in a truck in Britain this week, families and community organisers said yesterday, as one of the alleged truck owners denied involvement in the tragedy.

British police initially said all of the 31 men and eight women found early Wednesday in a refrigerated lorry in an industrial park in Grays, east of London, were believed to be Chinese nationals.

Four people have been held over the incident, which has shocked Britain and shed light on dangerous trafficking routes into Europe taken by undocumented migrants.

Several Vietnamese families now fear their relatives, who may have been carrying falsified Chinese passports, are among the victims.

Britain-based community group VietHome said it had received "photos of nearly 20 people reported missing, age 15-45" from Vietnam, a popular source for smuggled migrants looking to better their lives in the UK.

Nguyen Dinh Gia yesterday told AFP he got a call from his son two weeks ago saying he was planning to go to Britain where he hoped to work in a nail salon.

His 20-year-old son Nguyen Dinh Luong had been living in

France and said the journey would cost 11,000 pounds (\$14,000).

But Gia received a call several days ago from a Vietnamese man saying "Please have some sympathy, something unexpected happened," he recounted to AFP.

"I fell to the ground when I heard that," Gia said. "It seemed that he was in the truck with the accident, all of them dead," he added.

A 26-year-old Vietnamese woman Pham Thi Tra My is also believed to be among the victims after her family received a text message from her hours before the migrants were discovered.

"I'm sorry Mom. My path to abroad doesn't succeed. Mom, I love you so much! I'm dying because I can't breathe," she said in the message confirmed by her brother Pham Manh Cuong.

The truck carrying the migrants arrived in Purfleet on the River Thames estuary on a ferry from the Belgian port of Zeebrugge just over an hour before ambulance crews called the police at 1:40 am.

The driver, a 25-year-old man from Northern Ireland, was arrested at the scene. A married couple were held in Warrington in northwest England on Friday. The pair denied any involvement and said the truck had been sold to an Irish company more than a year ago. A fourth suspect, a 48-year-old man from Northern Ireland, has also been arrested.

UK LORRY HORROR



Pak ex-PM Sharif suffers heart attack

AFP, Lahore

Pakistan's former prime minister Nawaz Sharif suffered a minor heart attack while being treated in hospital on bail from prison where he is serving seven years for corruption, his party said yesterday.

The Lahore High Court granted Sharif -- who was PM three times before he was ousted over corruption allegations in 2017 -- bail on Friday at 10 million Pakistani rupees (\$63,900) on medical grounds "for an indefinite period".

"The former prime minister had a minor heart attack last night as he continues to suffer from an autoimmune blood disorder," Pakistan Muslim League(N) spokeswoman Mariam Aurangzeb told reporters in Islamabad.

Aurangzeb made the disclosure minutes after Islamabad High Court granted Sharif interim bail in another graft case on health grounds.

The bail will remain effective until Tuesday when judges hearing an application seeking bail for Sharif on health grounds return to take up the case.

The 69-year-old was taken to hospital on Tuesday when his blood platelet count dropped to dangerous levels.

The Supreme Court disqualified Sharif from politics for life over graft allegations in 2017, and he later received a seven-year jail sentence. He denies all the corruption charges against him and claims he is being targeted by the country's powerful security establishment.

NEWSIN brief

Argentina heads to polls today

AFP, Buenos Aires

Voters in Argentina will cast ballots today in a general election expected to hand the presidency to center-left Peronist candidate Alberto Fernandez -- and bring to an end the crisis-plagued rule of pro-business leader Mauricio Macri. Fernandez -- whose running mate is ex-president Cristina Kirchner -- is widely tipped in opinion polls to obtain the 45 percent of votes needed to secure an outright victory in the first round.

Court bans publishing HK police details

AFP, Hong Kong

A Hong Kong court has banned people from publishing a wide range of personal details about police officers and their families, including photos, in a bid to halt "doxxing" by pro-democracy protesters. The police force says many of its officers have had personal details leaked online -- known as "doxxing" -- and family members harassed as a result. The Hong Kong Journalists Association said it was "extremely concerned" about the potential limitations to media freedoms and said it was seeking legal advice.

US bars all flights to Cuba, except Havana

AFP, Washington

The United States will suspend all scheduled flights to Cuba except to its capital Havana, authorities said Friday, as US President Donald Trump pushes to dismantle the rapprochement begun by his predecessor Barack Obama. The suspension will be effective from December 10 and will affect nine airports on the island nation. The Trump administration accuses Cuba of aiding and abetting crisis-wracked Venezuela, which is Havana's closest ally.

US seeks data on Iran humanitarian sales

The United States on Friday asked foreign governments to submit detailed reports on humanitarian exports to Iran, a step observers said could have a chilling effect and cast a pall over European efforts to allow trade. US officials said the new mechanism will allow foreign governments and banks to reduce their risks by showing their transactions to Washington, which would certify they are in compliance with sanctions. The National Iranian American Council said the latest actions would increase the burden for humanitarian trade, amid accounts of Iranians who have gone without vital medicine or medical products.

California wildfires rage on

Wildfires raged across California on Friday, destroying homes and forcing evacuations, as over 1,000 firefighters tackled flames in the southern part of the state alone. Tens of thousands of residents near Santa Clarita, north of Los Angeles, fled their homes as the so-called Tick Fire scorched over 4,000 acres (1,618 hectares) and was only ten percent contained by Friday evening. The blaze forced the shutdown of all schools in the area as well as a major freeway, creating a traffic nightmare for commuters. Some 1,325 firefighters backed by air tankers and helicopters were battling the flames, being aided by winds gusting up to 65 miles per hour, that raced toward densely packed communities and threatened 10,000 structures, officials said.

Maria Butina freed by US



Maria Butina, who served nine months in a US jail for acting as a Russian government agent, arrived in Moscow yesterday, a day after her release from prison. She was arrested in July 2018 on allegations of engaging in espionage. In December, Butina entered a plea deal on a charge that she acted as an illegal, unregistered foreign agent, and was sentenced to 18 months in prison, half of which was credited as already served. Butina, a 30-year-old from Siberia, used ties with the NRA firearms lobby to help build a network of high-level Republican contacts. Those efforts brought her into contact with President Donald Trump before his 2016 election, as well as with one of his sons. Butina was the only Russian arrested and convicted in a three-year investigation of Moscow's interference in US politics. Moscow decried her case as being politically-motivated.

SOURCE: AFP