



WHO chief backing Tigray rebels Accuses Ethiopia

REUTERS

Ethiopia's military yesterday accused the World Health Organization (WHO) chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus of supporting and trying to procure arms and diplomatic backing for Tigray state's dominant political party, which is fighting federal forces.

"He himself is a member of that group and he is a criminal," army chief of staff General Birhanu Jula said in a televised statement, before calling for him to be removed. Birhanu did not offer any evidence to support his accusations.

There was no immediate WHO comment on the allegation against Tedros, who is Ethiopian of Tigrayan ethnicity.

Tedros served as Ethiopia's health minister and foreign minister from 2005-2016 in a ruling coalition led by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The TPLF effectively ruled Ethiopia for decades as the most powerful part of the coalition, until Prime Minister Ahmed Abiy took office in 2018.

Abiy has since folded the other three regional parties into his own national party, but the TPLF refused to join.

Fighting is raging Ethiopia since November 4 when Abiy attacked Tigray state accusing the TPLF of attacking two federal military camps in the region. His controversial campaign has seen warplanes bombing Tigray and heavy fighting, while the UN says a "full-scale humanitarian crisis" is unfolding, with 36,000 people having streamed into neighbouring Sudan, according to that country's refugee commission.

Pompeo visits Israeli-occupied West Bank

REUTERS, Shaar Binyamin

Mike Pompeo yesterday became the first US secretary of state to visit an Israeli West Bank settlement and the Golan Heights, in a show of solidarity that led Palestinians to accuse him of helping to cement Israeli control over occupied territory.

Pompeo's trips came during the Israeli leg of what may be his last tour of the Middle East in the final months of President Donald Trump's administration.

Trump delighted Israel in 2019 by recognising Israel's claim to sovereignty over the area of the Golan Heights that it captured from Syria in a 1967 war and later annexed, in a move that was not recognised by most of the international community.

Last year, Pompeo, an evangelical Christian, broke with decades of US foreign policy to announce that the United States under Trump no longer viewed Israel's settlements in the West Bank as "inconsistent with international law".

Yesterday morning Pompeo appeared alongside Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who said both Pompeo and Trump were long-standing friends of Israel.

Pompeo issued guidelines for Israeli products made in settlements to be labelled "Made in Israel" or "Product of Israel" when exported to the United States, removing the distinction between goods made within Israel and those produced in occupied territory.

First, Pompeo travelled the short distance from Jerusalem to the Israeli-occupied West Bank - known to most Israelis as Judea and Samaria - where more than 440,000 Jewish settlers live uneasily among three million Palestinians, mostly in fortified hilltop settlements.

Pompeo later flew to the Golan Heights, a strategic plateau that overlooks Israel, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan.

"I very much wanted to come here on this trip to tell the world that we have it right. That we, the United States has it right. That Israel has it right," Pompeo said from a hilltop looking into an area of the Syrian Golan that was until recently controlled by militias fighting the Syrian civil war.



Students of Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) hold up the names of the 12 detained in mainland China, in Hong Kong, China, yesterday. Dozens of Hong Kong students yesterday turned their graduation ceremony into a march to commemorate pro-democracy protests last year that included violent clashes with police across city campuses.

PHOTO: REUTERS

US death toll passes 250,000

New York closes schools; situation worsens in Russia

AFP, New York



US coronavirus deaths have passed a quarter of a million people as New York announced it would close schools to battle a rise in infections and anti-restriction protests in Europe turned violent.

America has now registered 250,426 fatalities, according to a running tally by Johns Hopkins University on Wednesday, by far the highest reported national death toll.

The novel coronavirus has killed at least 1,350,275 people since the outbreak emerged in China last December, according to a tally from official sources compiled by AFP at 11:00 GMT yesterday. At least 56,234,440 cases of coronavirus have been registered.

On Wednesday, 11,013 new deaths and 582,654 new cases were recorded worldwide. Based on latest reports, the countries with the most new deaths were the United States with 1,751 new deaths, followed by Brazil with 756 and Italy with 753.

US states and cities were imposing a raft of new

restrictions, including home confinement, the closure of indoor dining and a limit on gatherings as cases soar across the country, with more than 157,950 new infections recorded over the past 24 hours on Wednesday.

New York Mayor Bill de Blasio said the city's 1,800 public schools would revert to remote learning beginning Thursday after the Big Apple recorded a seven-day average positivity rate of three percent.

Europe meanwhile remains the hardest-hit region, accounting for 46 percent of new global cases and 49 percent of deaths last week, according to WHO.

In Russia, total coronavirus caseload surpassed two million. The country has witnessed a surge in cases over recent weeks but authorities have stopped short of reintroducing stringent lockdown measures like several European countries.

Health officials reported 23,610 new infections yesterday and 463 virus-related deaths, both record highs since the beginning of Russia's outbreak.

CLIMATE INACTION

Court gives France 3-month deadline

AFP, Paris

In a ruling hailed by campaigners as "historic", France's top administrative court yesterday gave the government a three-month deadline to show it is taking action to meet its commitments on climate change.

The government of France, which brokered the landmark 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change, was hauled before the Council of State by Grande-Synthe, a low-lying northern coastal town which is particularly exposed to the effects of climate change.

The Council, which rules on disputes over public policies, noted that "while France has committed itself to reducing its emissions by 40% in 2030 compared to 1990 levels, it has, in recent years, regularly exceeded the 'carbon budgets' it had set itself." It also noted that President Emmanuel Macron's government had, in a decree in April, deferred much of the reduction efforts beyond 2020.

In January 2019, the then Greens mayor of Grande-Synthe, Damien Careme petitioned the Council of State over what he called the government's "climate inaction".

Careme said his town of 23,000 people, which is built on land reclaimed from the sea, risked being flooded by rising sea levels.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Post-Brexit UK announces military spending boost

Britain pledged to end the "era of retreat" by announcing a major increase in military spending, despite the coronavirus crisis pummelling the economy, as it seeks to define its post-Brexit role on the world stage. In a speech to parliament yesterday outlining first conclusions from a big review of foreign policy and defence, Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced an extra 16.5 billion pounds (\$22 billion) for the military over the next four years. The defence budget is now just under 42 billion pounds a year.

Mumbai attack mastermind jailed for terror financing

A Pakistani court yesterday sentenced Islamist leader Hafiz Saeed, founder of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), the militant group blamed by the United States and India for the 2008 Mumbai siege, to 10 years in prison on two charges of terrorism financing, his lawyer said. Saeed is already in jail serving two sentences of five-and-a-half-years each, handed down to him in February this year, which means he will not serve any extra jail time. The conviction comes as Pakistan tries to avoid punitive blacklisting by global dirty money watchdog, the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), which judges a country's ability to combat illicit financing, including to militant organisations.

Pelosi wins bid to lead Democrats in US House

US Democratic lawmakers on Wednesday chose House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to lead the party into the Joe Biden era and preside over their narrow House majority as the most powerful person in Congress. The 80-year-old Pelosi – the highest-ranking woman in US congressional history and outgoing President Donald Trump's chief nemesis on Capitol Hill -- ran unopposed for the top job. A formal House floor vote for the speakership occurs in January after the new congressional session begins, and shortly before Biden takes office as president. She is widely expected to win.

Samoa records first case of coronavirus

Samoa announced its first case of Covid-19 yesterday, as the coronavirus pandemic continued to spread to previously untouched Pacific island nations. Prime Minister Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi called for calm in the nation of 200,000 after confirming a man who flew into the country last Friday tested positive while in managed isolation. With the infection report, only territories of Kiribati, Micronesia, Nauru, Palau, Tonga, and Tuvalu are believed to still be free of the virus.

SOURCE: AFP



Afghan President Ashraf Ghani (R) and Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan meet at the presidential palace in Kabul, Afghanistan, yesterday. Khan's first visit to Afghanistan comes at a time when peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government have been stalled. It also comes days after the Pentagon announced it would reduce the number of US military personnel in Afghanistan from 4,500 to 2,500 by mid-January. PHOTO: REUTERS

'WAR CRIMES' IN AFGHANISTAN

Australian special forces 'unlawfully killed' 39

AFP, Canberra

Australia's elite special forces "unlawfully killed" 39 Afghan civilians and prisoners, including summary executions as part of initiation rituals, according to evidence in a searing military inquiry now being referred to a special war crimes prosecutor.

A years-long internal investigation into military misconduct was released yesterday, prompting the Chief of the Australian Defence Force to admit a "destructive" culture of impunity among special forces leading to a string of alleged murders and cover-ups spanning years.

"Some patrols took the law into their own hands, rules were broken, stories concocted, lies told and prisoners killed," General Angus Campbell said, apologising "sincerely and unreservedly" to the people of Afghanistan.

"This shameful record includes alleged instances in which new patrol members were coerced to shoot a prisoner in order to achieve that soldier's first kill, in an appalling practice known as 'bloodding'."

The report also reported evidence that troops were engaged in "body count competitions", and covered up unlawful killings by staging skirmishes, planting weapons and adding names to target lists retrospectively.

The military's own inspector general produced the harrowing 465-page official inquiry into events between 2005 and 2016 that detailed dozens of killings "outside the heat of battle". It recommended 19 individuals be referred to Australian Federal Police, compensation be paid to the families of victims, and the military makes a slew of reforms.

Campbell went a step further, saying the perpetrators would be referred to the office of the special investigator for war crimes. He also moved to revoke distinguished service medals awarded to special operations forces who served in Afghanistan between 2007 and 2013.

Thai PM threatens to use all laws against protesters

REUTERS, Bangkok

Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha yesterday threatened to use all laws possible against protesters, as demonstrations escalate for his removal and for reforms to curb the powers of King Maha Vajiralongkorn.

Activists voiced concern that this could mean the resumption of prosecutions under some of the world's harshest royal insult laws.

"Prayuth has declared a battle against the people," said rights lawyer and protest leader Arnon Nampa. "For civil servants who have not chosen sides, you need to decide whether to live in the past or to build a future with us."

The protests since July have become the greatest challenge to Thailand's establishment in years and have broken a longstanding taboo by criticising the monarchy, which can carry a jail term of up to 15 years.

Prayuth's announcement came a day after thousands of protesters threw paint at the headquarters of the police in what they said was a response to the use of water

cannon and teargas that hurt dozens on Tuesday, the most violent day of protests since July. Some protesters also sprayed anti-monarchy graffiti.

The situation is not improving," Prayuth said in a statement. "There is a risk of escalation to more violence. If not addressed, it could damage the country and the beloved monarchy."

The government will intensify its actions and use all laws, all articles, to take action against protesters who broke the law."

He did not specify whether this included Article 112 of the criminal code, which forbids insulting the monarchy. Prayuth said earlier in the year that it was not being used for the moment at the request of the king.

Police have been collecting evidence since July for possible prosecutions for violating the article but had not taken further steps, one police source said.

Outraged by the anti-monarchy graffiti at Wednesday's demonstration, some royalists called for the application of Article 112 in posts on social media.

Georgia set to release recount result

Trump's legal team asks judge in Pennsylvania to declare him as winner

REUTERS, Washington

The US presidential election battleground state of Georgia was expected to affirm Joe Biden's victory over Donald Trump after a painstaking recount, which would deal yet another setback to the president's attempts to cling to power.

Georgia's top election official, a Republican, has said the manual recount of almost 5 million votes is unlikely to erode Biden's initial 14,000 winning margin by enough to hand Trump victory in the state.

That would leave Republican Trump with a dwindling number of options to overturn the results of an election in which Democrat Biden won 5.8 million more votes nationwide. Barring a series of unprecedented events, Biden will be sworn in on Jan 20.

In the state-by-state Electoral College that determines the winner, Biden has captured 306 electoral votes to Trump's 232, well ahead of the 270 needed for victory. The winner in each state is awarded that state's electoral votes, a number roughly proportional to the population.

Flipping Georgia's 16 votes would still leave Trump at least two closely contested states away



from overturning Biden's victory. Georgia officials say they expect to release results later yesterday ahead of a certification deadline on Friday.

In Pennsylvania, where Biden won by 82,000 votes, the Trump campaign is asking a judge to declare him the winner there, saying its Republican-controlled legislature should choose the state's slate of 20 Electoral College voters.

In Wisconsin, the Trump campaign has paid for a partial recount, even though election officials there say that will likely only add to Biden's 20,000-vote advantage in a state that carries 10 electoral votes.

Trump's campaign has filed lawsuits in a number of other states, including Michigan, with scant success so far.

Those legal motions, sprinkled with factual errors, have been dismissed by Biden's campaign

as "theatrics" that are not based on sound law. Several prominent law firms have pulled out of the operation, leaving Trump's personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani to spearhead the efforts.

Trump yesterday said on Twitter that lawyers would discuss a "viable path to victory" at a news conference at noon ET (1700 GMT).

State and federal election officials, as well as outside experts, say Trump's argument that the election was stolen from him by widespread voter fraud has no basis in fact.

However, it does appear to be affecting public confidence in American democracy. A Reuters/Ipsos opinion poll released on Wednesday found about half of Republicans believe Trump "rightfully won" the election.

Arizona's top election official, Democrat Katie Hobbs, said she and her family had been getting violent threats and urged Trump to stop casting doubt on the result, in which he lost by just over 10,000 votes.

Trump administration has so far refused to recognize Biden as the winner, which has held up funding and security clearances to ease the transition from one president to another ahead of the Jan. 20 inauguration.