

## Diplomats check India's easing of J&K clampdown

REUTERS, Srinagar

India is hosting international diplomats in the disputed Jammu and Kashmir to showcase efforts to restore normalcy over a year after it stripped the region's special status, officials said.

A group of 24 envoys were in Kashmir on Wednesday and in Jammu on Thursday. It was the third delegation of diplomats to visit since August 2019, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government ended Jammu and Kashmir state's autonomy, split it into two federally run territories and locked it down for weeks.

Armed guards and officials from the external affairs ministry accompanied diplomats from Africa, the EU, Central and South Asian nations on a tightly controlled tour of Srinagar, the largest city in Kashmir, residents said.

Despite the government's desire to showcase normalcy, several roads were deserted and markets were partially shut because of a security clampdown.

Tens of thousands of people have been killed in an uprising against Indian rule in Muslim-majority Kashmir that started in 1989, but violence has slowed in recent months.

The diplomats were allowed to speak to local residents and discuss their responses to recent local elections and economic opportunities.

"I told the diplomats how unemployment was rising and government will have to create many jobs for the youth to prevent them from starting protests," said Fayzal Sheikh, 46, a textile trader in Srinagar city.

Modi's government has repeatedly stressed that life is back to normal in the Himalayan region, which is claimed by India and arch-rival Pakistan.

In recent months India has eased numerous restrictions, and restored internet connectivity in a bid to end one of the world's longest shutdowns in a democracy.



Leftist students block train tracks to disrupt the suburban railway service to protest against the central government's recent agricultural reforms, police brutality in West Bengal and the petrol price hike, in Kolkata, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

## 'OVERTHROW PLOT' General, judges detained in Bhutan

AFP, Thimphu

Police in Bhutan, the Himalayan kingdom famed for its happiness index, have detained a top general and two judges over an alleged plot to overthrow the country's top military officer and chief justice.

The allegations about the conspiracy to take over top jobs in the army and judiciary have rocked the tiny country of 750,000 people jammed between India and China that prides itself on its clean-cut image.

Former Royal bodyguard commandant Brigadier Thinley Tobgay, Supreme Court judge Kuenley Tshering and top district court judge Yeshey Dorji appeared in court on Wednesday after being detained at their homes.

The three have been accused of plotting to overthrow the country's top military officer, Lieutenant General Batoo Tshering by implicating him in a corruption scandal.

All were denied bail by the Thimphu district court and remanded in custody until a first formal hearing on February 27.

According to reports, Tobgay was alleged to have illegally obtained military documents on the procurement of vehicles from the United Nations.

The Bhutanese newspaper said that while the tender was handled publicly and fairly, the documents were to be used to undermine the position of the military number one.

Other reports said the plot between the three men was revealed to authorities by a woman detained a few months ago.

The three "friends" wanted to take on the jobs in charge of the military, as chief justice of the Supreme Court and as attorney general, the reports said.

Batoo Tshering has been Bhutan's chief operations officer for more than a decade.

## Iran 'playing with fire'

Says Germany as European powers meet US in a bid to end impasse over nuclear deal ahead of Tehran's Feb 21 deadline

AFP, Paris

Foreign ministers from European powers and the United States were holding talks yesterday exploring ways to revive the 2015 deal on Iran's nuclear drive, days ahead of a deadline set by Tehran that could pose a new obstacle.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian hosted his German and British counterparts in Paris, with America's new Secretary of State Antony Blinken joining via videoconference.

The foreign ministers expressed their "shared fundamental security interest in upholding the nuclear non-proliferation regime" for Iran, Britain said in a statement. "Regarding Iran, the E3 and the United States expressed their shared fundamental security interest in upholding the nuclear non-proliferation regime and ensuring that Iran can never develop a nuclear weapon," it added.

Analysts say only a small window of opportunity remains to save the deal, which received a near-fatal blow when former US president Donald Trump walked out of the accord in 2018 and reimposed sanctions on Iran.

Tehran retaliated by stepping up nuclear work in violation of the accord.

"The recent steps of Iran are not helpful at all,



they endanger the return of the Americans" to the deal, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas told reporters in Paris.

"Apparently Iran is not interested in easing the tensions, but in escalation. They are playing with fire," he said.

The administration of US President Joe Biden has said it is prepared to rejoin the deal and start lifting sanctions if Iran -- whose economy has been devastated -- returns to full compliance.

But Tehran rejected this precondition, pressing on with increasing nuclear work in retaliation for Trump's so-called "maximum pressure"

sanctions policy to weaken the Iranian regime which has had no relations with Washington for four decades.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), signed in Vienna in 2015, was based on Iran providing safeguards that it would not make an atomic bomb, in exchange for a gradual easing of international sanctions.

The diplomacy is expected to be hugely delicate and could be further derailed by the deadline set under a bill adopted by the Iranian parliament in December following the killing of top nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhri-zadeh, which Tehran blamed on Israel.

Iran would restrict some UN nuclear agency inspections by February 21 if the US does not lift the sanctions imposed since 2018.

International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) chief Rafael Grossi is to travel to Tehran on Saturday for talks with the Iranian authorities to find a solution for continuing inspections in the country, the agency said.

The IAEA said last week that Iran had started producing uranium metal in a new violation of the accord, intensifying concerns it was becoming closer to having the capacity to make a nuclear weapon.

## DEPLOYMENT OF TROOPS

### Nato puts holds on Afghan decision

Troops numbers to increase in Iraq

AFP, Brussels

Nato Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg yesterday said the alliance had made "no final decision" on the future of its Afghanistan mission, as new US President Joe Biden weighs pulling out troops.

While defence ministers held off on making that call at a two-day virtual conference, they did decide to expand a Nato training mission in Iraq from 500 to "around 4,000" personnel.

The fate of Nato's 9,600-strong support mission in Afghanistan was top of the agenda after former US leader Donald Trump struck a deal with the Taliban to pull troops out. Biden's administration is reviewing whether to stick to a looming May 1 deadline to withdraw or risk a bloody backlash from the insurgents by staying.

"We are faced with many dilemmas and there are no easy options. At this stage, we have made no final decision on the future of our presence," Stoltenberg said at a news conference.

The Taliban has launched a string of offensives threatening at least two provincial capitals and warned Nato ministers not to seek a "continuation of occupation and war" by staying. Stoltenberg insisted the Taliban must live up to commitments under the deal with the US, including making progress in peace talks with Kabul, reducing violence and cutting ties to "international terrorist groups".

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