

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.



Indian farmers offer the police officers and administration officials (not pictured) sweets while blocking a railway track to stop train services at Modi Nagar railway station as part of protests against farm laws in Uttar Pradesh, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

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 cleancut 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.

CRUMBLING IRAN NUCLEAR ACCORD

Europe powers to meet US

Biden makes first call to Israel's Netanyahu after delay, criticism

AGENCIES

Top diplomats from European powers and the United States will hold talks yesterday to see how to revive the 2015 deal on Iran's nuclear drive, days ahead of a deadline set by Tehran that could hinder the efforts by limiting inspections.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian will host his German and British counterparts in Paris, with America's new top diplomat Antony Blinken joining via videoconference, the French foreign ministry said.

Highlighting the tough path ahead, German Chancellor Angela Merkel voiced "concern" that Iran was failing to meet its obligations in telephone talks with President Hassan Rouhani, her spokesman said in a statement.

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

The administration of Joe Biden has said it is prepared to rejoin the deal and start lifting sanctions if Iran returns to full compliance, a precondition disputed by Tehran.

Ahead of the talks Biden spoke overnight to Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu, with the two



leaders discussing the "Iranian threat and regional challenges", according to a White House readout.

Adding to the tension, Iran plans to restrict some UN nuclear agency inspections if the US does not lift its sanctions -- imposed since 2018 -- by February 21, under the terms of a bill adopted by its parliament in December.

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.

It warned that the step threatened by Tehran would have "a serious impact on the IAEA's verification and monitoring activities in the country."

In Washington, State Department spokesman Ned Price said that Iran should provide "full and timely cooperation" with the IAEA.

"Iran should reverse the steps and refrain from taking others that would impact the IAEA assurances on which not only the United States, not only our allies and partners in the region, but the entire world relies," he said, adding that Blinken saw an "important role" for the EU.

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.

But Iran has stepped up its nuclear work in violation of the accord after US sanctions were reimposed as part of Trump's "maximum pressure" policy to weaken the Iranian regime.

The UN nuclear watchdog said last week that Iran had started producing uranium metal in a new violation of the accord, prompting the European powers to warn that Tehran was "undermining the opportunity for renewed diplomacy."

'It is a conspiracy'

West Bengal CM slams attack on minister, alleges certain people 'pressuring' him to switch party

'PTI, Kolkata

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee yesterday alleged that the bomb attack on state minister Jakir Hossain was part of a conspiracy as certain people were "pressuring" him to switch over to another party.

Mamata, who went to the SSKM hospital to inquire after his condition following Wednesday's incident, slammed the railways for its "lack lusture" way of functioning.

"It was a preplanned attack on minister Jakir Hossain. It is a conspiracy. Some people (party) were pressuring Jakir Hossain to join them for the last few months. I don't want to disclose anything more as investigation is on," Mamata told reporters.

Mamata compared the attack to the assassination of Punjab hief minister Beant Singh in the 1990s.

According to TMC sources, around 26 have been injured out of which 14 with serious injuries are admitted at SSKM hospital in Kolkata.

On Wednesday night, some unidentified attackers hurled crude bombs at Hossain at Nimtita railway station, in Murshidabad district, police said. According to sources, the incident occurred around 9:45 pm. Hossain, the minister of state for labour, was waiting on Platform No. 2 to catch a train to Kolkata when he was attacked.

Hospital sources said Hossain suffered serious injuries in his hands and legs. All the injured were taken to the Murshidabad Medical College and Hospital.

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