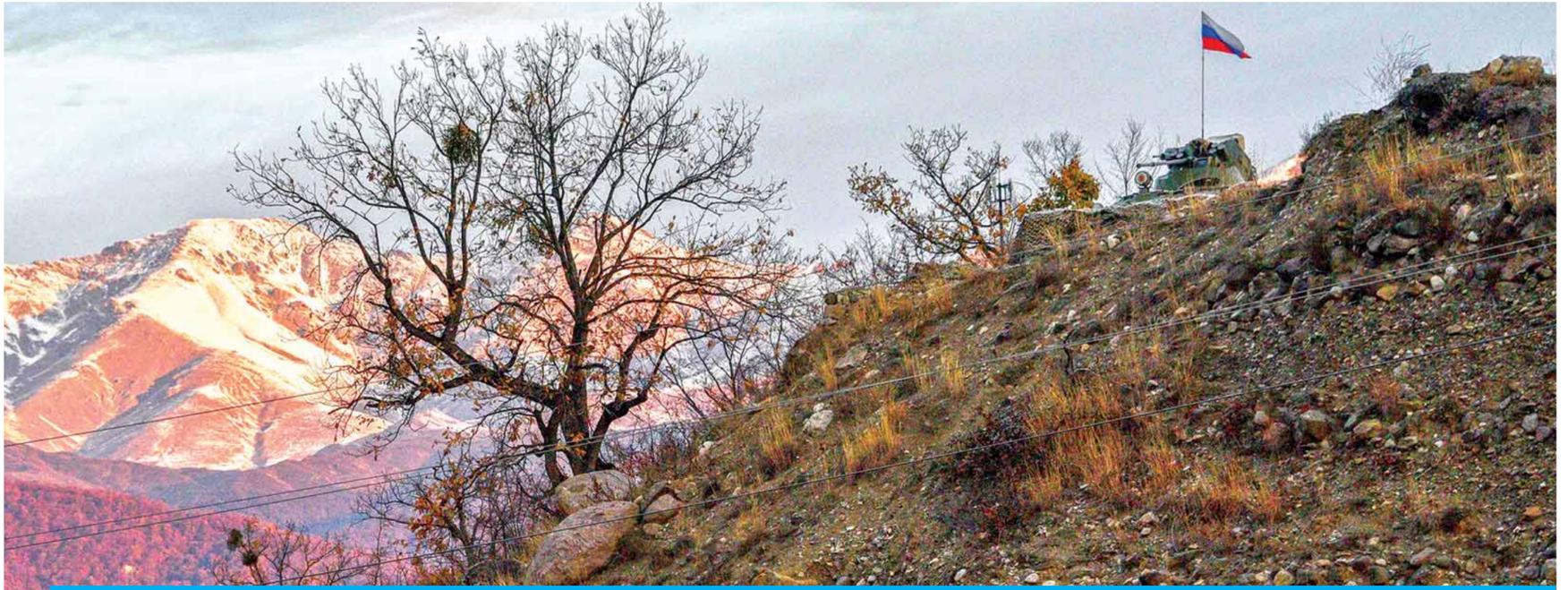


World scrambles for vaccine deals as infections near 60m

Thai protesters rally as leaders summoned over defamation

Page 7

Page 6



CHAREKTAR, Azerbaijan: An armored personnel carrier (APC) of Russian peacekeeping forces is stationed above the demarcation line near this village yesterday as Azerbaijan forces entered the Kalbajar district. — AFP

Azerbaijan moves into Kalbajar district

Second district handed back by Armenia under peace deal

CHEREKTAR, Azerbaijan: Azerbaijani soldiers and military trucks rolled into the district of Kalbajar yesterday, reclaiming the second of three regions Armenia is handing back under a deal that ended weeks of fighting. Images released by Azerbaijan's defense ministry showed troops deploying into the district overnight, some scanning for landmines on snow-covered roads.

The district is among those being handed back by Armenia after it agreed to a peace deal ending six weeks of clashes over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region. Kalbajar, wedged between Karabakh and the territory of Armenia, was initially scheduled for handover on November 15 but Azerbaijan pushed back the deadline for humanitarian reasons.

Armenia agreed to hand back three districts around Karabakh - Aghdam, Kalbajar and Lachin - as part of the deal that stopped an Azerbaijani offensive that had reclaimed swathes of territory lost to Armenian separatists in a 1990s war. Aghdam was ceded on Nov 20 and Lachin is to be handed over by Dec 1.

Kalbajar 'liberated'

Near the village of Cherektar on the edges of

Kalbajar, Armenian soldiers were setting up a checkpoint with stacks of tyres blocking the road. Holding a Kalashnikov rifle and with a white cross drawn on the front of his camouflage uniform, 20-year-old soldier Armen Shakhnazaryan said it was a shame for Armenia to lose the district. "We have a lot of churches here," Shakhnazaryan told AFP. "Our ancestors, our elders and our friends are buried here."

In a televised address yesterday, Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev congratulated his people, saying Kalbajar had been "liberated". He said historic monuments in the district including churches and mosques were considered "historical treasures" by mainly Muslim Azerbaijan and would be preserved.

Azerbaijanis who fled the region nearly 30 years ago are expected to return as Armenians left en masse. In the days before the handover, Kalbajar residents packed all they could take, determined to leave nothing for their longtime foes. Locals collected electric cables, loaded parts of a hydroelectric power station into a truck and even cut down trees to take with them as they left.

Clashes between the ex-Soviet rivals over Nagorno-

Karabakh broke out in late September, reigniting a long-simmering conflict over the mountainous region. The ethnic Armenian enclave broke away from Azerbaijani control in the 1990s war and declared independence, though this was never internationally recognized.

The peace deal was reached after Azerbaijan's military overwhelmed Armenian separatist forces and threatened to advance on Karabakh's main city Stepanakert. Under the agreement, Armenia is losing control of seven districts seized during the post-Soviet war in the 1990s, which killed 30,000 people and displaced many Azerbaijanis that used to live there.

The separatists are retaining control over most of Karabakh's Soviet-era territory and some 2,000 Russian peacekeepers have deployed along frontline areas and to protect the Lachin corridor, which connects Karabakh with Armenia. Other Armenians have meanwhile been returning to Karabakh itself. Russia said on Tuesday it had helped more than 13,000 people to return from Armenia after they had fled the fighting, which left thousands dead including more than 100 civilians.

Russia steals spotlight

Moscow's role in halting the fighting has stolen the spotlight from France and the United States, who together with Russia form the so-called Minsk Group of negotiators that brokered an unstable ceasefire in the 1990s. The three countries attempted three separate ceasefires during the recent fighting, all of which collapsed as Armenia and Azerbaijan accused each other of violations.

Since the peace deal was announced, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has faced a backlash at home, with protesters ransacking government buildings and demanding his resignation. Russian President Vladimir Putin held phone calls with Pashinyan and Aliyev ahead of the Kalbajar handover to discuss "further measures to provide humanitarian aid", the Kremlin said on Tuesday.

Also on Tuesday, Putin spoke to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to discuss the work of Russia's peacekeepers in the region. Russia insists that Turkey - a key ally of Azerbaijan - will not take part in the peacekeeping mission, despite Azerbaijani claims to the contrary. — AFP

Ethiopian PM rejects 'interference' ahead of deadline

ADDIS ABABA: Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed yesterday said he rejected international "interference" in Ethiopia's affairs, hours before a deadline for Tigray's rebellious leaders to surrender or face an assault on their capital. Abiy, the winner of last year's Nobel Prize, late Sunday gave the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) 72 hours to surrender - an ultimatum rejected by the leader of the dissident northern region, who has said his people are "ready to die" for their homeland.

As the clock ticked down, the UN Security Council held its first meeting on the three-week old crisis, with particular concern for civilians in the regional capital Mekele. Ethiopian forces say they are encircling the city with tanks ahead of an assault on the TPLF, and have urged its half million residents to leave. Rights groups have warned that attacking the city could constitute a war crime. The UN, US, EU and others have urged restraint, and called for an immediate halt to hostilities.

Abiy has resisted calls for mediation and insists the "law enforcement operation" against the TPLF is entering its decisive final stage. In a statement yesterday, he said Ethiopia appreciated the concern but stressed his government was "very much capable" of resolving the matter on its own. "While we consider the concerns and advice of our friends, we reject any interference in our internal affairs," Abiy said. "We therefore respectfully urge the international community to refrain from any unwelcome and unlawful acts of interference and respect the fundamental principles of non-intervention under international law." — AFP



PRETORIA: Ethiopians from the Tigray region living in South Africa hold placards as they gather and protest outside the Department of International Relations and Cooperation yesterday. — AFP

Stateless scientist sets sights on COVID vaccine

LONDON: Ask scientist Nowras Rahhal about his cutting-edge work on a COVID-19 vaccine and he is eager to explain the complexities, but ask him where he comes from and he struggles for words. Rahhal, who moved to Germany two years ago from Syria's war-shattered capital Damascus, is stateless - meaning no country recognizes him as a citizen. "When you are stateless, the simple question 'Where are you from?' becomes very loaded," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. "Most people are happy to say where they belong, but I don't know what to answer. I'd love to have a place to call home." Rahhal, 27, has just finished working with a team at one of the Max Planck institutes on developing a system allowing a COVID-19 vaccine to be applied to the skin, rather than injected into muscle. He said the technique - targeting specialist immune cells in the skin that can trigger an immune reaction in the body - would require a far smaller dose per person, a big advantage when inoculating large populations.

Before arriving in Germany, Rahhal spent years studying to the sound of bombings and artillery fire, using his phone torch to read when the electricity cut out at his Damascus home. But Rahhal's academic achievements are remarkable for another reason - stateless people often struggle to access education.

Rahhal's grandfather was among tens of thousands of Palestinians who fled the Mediterranean city of Haifa during conflict surrounding the birth of Israel in 1948. Today there are half a million Palestinians in Syria, but they are not allowed to naturalize even though most were born in the country. Although Rahhal's mother is Syrian, laws in many Arab countries ban women passing their nationality to their children, so Rahhal, his two brothers and sister were born stateless like their father.

There are an estimated 10 million stateless people in the world with large populations in Myanmar, Ivory Coast, Thailand and Dominican Republic. Deprived of basic rights, they often live on the margins of society. While stateless Palestinians do not enjoy the same rights as Syrian nationals, they can access education, healthcare and jobs.

Rahhal, who spent most of his childhood in the now bombed out Damascus suburb of Darayya, went to a school run by UNRWA, the UN agency responsible for Palestinian refugees. The scientist said he was lucky to be born into a family that valued education. His Syrian-born father is an agricultural engineer, his mother an economist. But as he grew up, Rahhal saw how statelessness stalled his father's career and prevented him pursuing opportunities abroad.

There was social prejudice too. After meeting a girl at university, Rahhal was crushed when her family ended the relationship. "They told me I wasn't welcome



Nowras Rahhal

because I was a stateless refugee. This incident had a big impact on me. It was pure discrimination," he said. Leaving his family in 2018 was heartbreaking. "It was like I was saying goodbye almost for the last time because I don't know when I'll see them again," he said. "When I saw my family crying I was determined to do something that made them proud."

Rahhal said the war has left him with physical and psychological scars, but prefers not to talk about his experiences. He did not flee Syria as a refugee, but applied to study in Germany after gaining a degree in pharmaceutical sciences from Damascus University. Rahhal's diligence has seen him nominated for best international student at the University of Kassel, where he received a masters in nanosciences this month, achieving the highest grade. He has also learned German, worked on cancer drug research and helped with a bilingual storytelling project for refugee children.

'Undefined person'

But Rahhal's statelessness continues to cast a large shadow over his life. Even simple tasks like validating a phone SIM card become a huge headache without a nationality, he said. Flummoxed German authorities have changed his status three times - first categorizing him as stateless, then Syrian, and now as unspecified. "When you look at your ID and you see you are an 'undefined person' it's really painful," he said.

His documents create suspicion among officials and baffle acquaintances. "If I say I'm stateless I worry if people will think I've done something so bad in life that I've had my nationality taken away," he added. Christoph Rademacher, a professor in molecular drug targeting, who picked Rahhal to join the COVID-19 vaccine project, said he was astonished when he learned about the hurdles his protegee has had to overcome.

Rahhal is now embarking on a PhD in vaccine technology under Rademacher at the University of Vienna. Their vaccine has passed initial tests and is undergoing further trials with another team. Rahhal hopes his story will encourage other young stateless people to dream big, and spur more countries to back a UN campaign to end statelessness called #Ibelong. UN experts say the global failure to integrate stateless people is an enormous waste of human potential. "I'm very lucky because I had the chance to get an education," Rahhal said. "I'm sure if other stateless kids had these opportunities we'd hear a lot more success stories." — Reuters

Lame-duck Trump pardons turkey

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump emerged from self-imposed isolation on Tuesday to show that at least one thing in Washington would run according to tradition: The pardoning of a Thanksgiving turkey. In the Rose Garden, Trump stuck to the script in pardoning a 42-pound turkey named Corn as part of an annual presidential ritual, the sparing of a turkey from American dinner tables on the Thanksgiving holiday on Thursday.

"Corn, I hereby grant you a full pardon," Trump said, raising a hand over the white bird with long wattle. Corn gobbled approvingly after the pardon to applause from the seated crowd of White House staffers, many of them wearing masks to guard against the coronavirus. Since losing the presidential election to Democrat Joe Biden three weeks ago, Trump has defied custom. There's been no concession speech and no phone call to Biden. He has largely remained out of sight.

Trump has bitterly fought the results of the Nov 3 election with nothing to show for it. His administration's move to allow for a proper transition of power to Biden on Monday was a sign that he knows he is a lame-duck president, but one reluctant to cede the stage. Trump's annual trek to his oceanfront Mar-a-Lago resort for the Thanksgiving holiday was canceled by first lady Melania Trump, a move seen internally as a sign the Trumps realize this will be the last such holiday they spend at the White House.

When the Dow Jones cracked 30,000 on Tuesday, Trump was so eager to take credit for it that aides scrambled to get the White House briefing room ready for his hastily arranged appearance and shouted at reporters to take their seats. "The stock market Dow Jones Industrial Average just hit 30,000, which is the highest in history," said Trump. "We've never broken 30,000. And that's despite everything that's taken place with the pandemic." — Reuters



WASHINGTON: First Lady Melania Trump looks on as US President Donald Trump gives the National Thanksgiving turkey "Corn" a presidential pardon in the Rose Garden of the White House on Tuesday. — AFP