



Backlash after
Macron warns
unvaccinated

North Korea fires suspected ballistic missile into sea



ALMATY: This image grab shows protesters near an administrative building during a rally over a hike in energy prices yesterday. —AFP

Kazakhstan protests spin out of control

Mayor's office stormed • Internet cut • President vows 'tough' response

ALMATY: Kazakhstan cut Internet and mobile phone access yesterday as its president promised a tough response to what he said were "massive attacks" on security forces. Days of protests over a rise in fuel prices erupted into clashes with police and the storming of government buildings yesterday, in the biggest challenge to the Central Asian country's authoritarian government in decades.

Accusing protesters of "massive attacks on law enforcement" that left several dead and wounded, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev said he would not tolerate further lawlessness. "I am obliged to protect the safety and peace of our citizens, to worry about the integrity of Kazakhstan," he said in a televised address. "I intend to act as tough as possible," Tokayev said. "Together we will overcome this black period in the history of Kazakhstan."

Protests spread across the ex-Soviet nation of 19 million this week in outrage over a New Year increase in prices for Liquid Petroleum Gas (LPG), which is widely used to fuel cars in the west of the country. Thousands took to the streets in the country's biggest city Almaty and in the western province of Mangystau, saying the price rise was unfair given oil and gas exporter Kazakhstan's vast energy reserves.

After a night of unrest that saw more than 200 peo-

ple detained, several thousand protesters stormed the headquarters of the local administration in Almaty yesterday afternoon and appeared to have seized control of the building.

Stun grenades, tear gas

Police fired stun grenades and tear gas at the crowd, some armed with batons and shields seized from police, but were unable to prevent them from entering the building, an AFP correspondent at the scene said. Local media reported that protesters then set their sights on the presidential residence in Almaty. Both it and the mayor's office were reported to be in flames.

There were reports of other government buildings being targeted in Almaty and elsewhere, but the full picture was unclear as communications were disrupted. Journalists and witnesses inside Kazakhstan could not be reached through the internet or mobile phones. "Kazakhstan is now in the midst of a nation-scale Internet blackout after a day of mobile internet disruptions and partial restrictions," web monitoring group NetBlocks said. "The incident is likely to severely limit coverage of escalating anti-government protests."

The protests are the biggest threat so far to the regime

established by Kazakhstan's founding president Nursultan Nazarbayev, who stepped down in 2019 and ushered Tokayev into the presidency. Clashes erupted overnight in Almaty, with police firing stun grenades and tear gas into a crowd of more than 5,000 people that marched through central streets shouting anti-government slogans and sometimes attacking vehicles.

Tokayev moved quickly to try to head off the unrest, accepting the resignation of the cabinet headed by Prime Minister Askar Mamin. He also imposed states of emergency in the capital Nur-Sultan, Almaty, and Mangystau province from January 5 until Jan 19. An overnight curfew will be in place in the areas from 11:00 pm to 7:00 am, with restrictions on movement in and out.

'Old man out'

The protesters in Almaty yelled "old man out" - a reference to Tokayev's still-powerful predecessor Nazarbayev - and "government resign" before police moved in. Tokayev was handpicked as a successor by Nazarbayev, a close ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin. One of five ex-Soviet nations in Central Asia, Kazakhstan is of crucial importance to Russia as an economic partner and home to a large ethnic Russian population.

"We are closely following the events in the brotherly neighboring country," Russia's foreign ministry said in a statement. "We support a peaceful solution to all problems... through dialogue, not through street riots and violation of laws," it said. Kazakhstan's government tolerates little real opposition and has been accused of silencing independent voices and media. Spontaneous, unsanctioned protests are illegal despite a 2020 law that passed easing some restrictions of freedom of assembly. Smaller rallies had been staged in cities across the republic from Sunday, beginning with the town of Zhanaozen in Mangystau.

Gas price rise outrage

The initial cause of the unrest was a spike in prices for LPG in hydrocarbon-rich Mangystau. Reports by independent media suggested that Tokayev's announcement of a new price of 50 tenge (11 US cents) per litre, down from 120 at the beginning of the year, failed to weaken the rallies in Zhanaozen and Mangystau's capital Aktau as demonstrators aired new demands. In 2011, at least 14 striking oil workers were killed in Zhanaozen as police crushed a protest over pay and working conditions, the deadliest unrest since the republic gained independence in 1991. —AFP

Iraq's Hashed take centerstage in soft power play

BASRA: Hardened fighters of Iraq's Shiite former paramilitary Hashed al-Shaabi organization are seeking a new avenue to exert their influence - the theatre. Dubbed the "biggest theatrical production in Iraq", the pro-Iran Hashed - integrated into government forces in 2019 - has sought a captive audience in southern Iraq's impoverished, predominantly Shiite city of Basra. The events of the play stretch from the dawn of time in the Garden of Eden to more recent events - most notably Washington's killing of Iranian general Qasem Soleimani and the Hashed's own deputy leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. Its Iranian director, Said Ismaili, explained that the play centers on the concept of the "just and the unjust".

Iran and its allies across the Middle East have in recent days held emotional commemorations for Soleimani and Muhandis, who were assassinated in a US drone strike in the Iraqi capital Baghdad on

January 3, 2020. Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi has vowed revenge against former US President Donald Trump unless he is tried over the killing of the revered commander. In Basra, the play was introduced as a "joint production between Iraqi and Iranian artists", featuring 140 actors, special effects, and even horses and camels.

'Soft war'

Formed in 2014 after a fatwa from Iraq's highest Shiite authority, Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the Hashed played a key role in the defeat of IS alongside Iraqi forces backed by the US-led coalition. In the years since Iraq announced its "victory" over the group in late 2017, the Hashed has gained considerable social and political influence, notably through its political arm, the Fatah (Conquest) Alliance. The organization has its own media outlets, film productions and even football and basketball teams.

Detractors of the Hashed accuse it of acting on Iran's behalf, and Fatah's political influence has been undermined by a relatively poor performance in October elections - with the group alleging the polls were marred by "fraud". "From the point of view of a cold war... our weapons must always be ready," the play's director said.



BASRA: Actors carry coffins draped in the flags of Iran, Iraq, and the Hashed al-Shaabi as they re-enact the 2019 funeral of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani during a play on Dec 29, 2021. —AFP

But Ismaili also referred to a "soft war", unfolding through "cultural and artistic spaces". The play helps the Hashed tell its stories to people. "There are people, our children for example, who are ignorant of certain things," spectator Ali Soueid said. "They need something like this to understand what happened in the battle... how people were killed." —AFP

Trump cancels press conf, Biden to address nation

WASHINGTON: Donald Trump on Tuesday abruptly gave up his plan to steal the limelight on the anniversary of the January 6th assault against Congress, leaving President Joe Biden to address a divided nation. Trump's decision to ditch his controversial press conference in Florida means Americans will be spared a bitter split-screen moment on Thursday.

If it had gone ahead, Biden would have marked what he calls "one of the darkest days" in US history, while Trump, just a few hours later, was due to promote his lie about being cheated out of victory in the 2020 presidential election. No question, though, that Trump will be looming over Biden.

In a statement announcing the demise of his press conference, Trump yet again pushed his conspiracy theory that "fraud" accounted for his defeat to

Biden, calling it "the Crime of the Century". The statement underlined how one year after a mob of Trump supporters marched on Congress to try and prevent lawmakers from certifying Biden's victory, political wounds remain far from healed.

Today, Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris will speak from inside the Capitol's Statuary Hall, the setting during the unrest of almost unbelievable scenes as Trump supporters fought past police to invade the heart of US democracy. As a veteran politician who came out of retirement to take on what he saw as Trump's authoritarian presidency, Biden has often warned during his first year in the White House of an "existential" threat to political freedoms that until now most Americans took for granted. —AFP

3 arrested over Muslim women 'auction' app

MUMBAI: Three young Indians accused of setting up a fake auction app advertising the sale of prominent Muslim women have been arrested, police said yesterday. Photos of more than 100 women - among them a number of prominent local journalists and activists known for speaking on issues affecting Indian Muslims - were featured on the "Bulli Bai" app alongside derogatory messages. Police said an 18-year-old woman and two men in their early twenties had been detained in connection with the app.

"Pictures of some ladies belonging to a particular community were uploaded and... objectionable messages were also put," Hemant Nagrale, Mumbai's police commis-

sioner, told reporters. Nagrale said further details about the case would not be released by police at this stage.

Members of India's Muslim minority have spoken out in recent years about what they feel are growing attempts to target or marginalize their communities. Another fake auction platform targeting Muslim women briefly appeared six months ago, prompting a police investigation that failed to yield any suspects. Women whose images featured on the latest app have voiced their dismay on social media.

"This is how we are greeted and treated in India on the first day of the new year, while other people in my country have fun, joke and party," poet Nabiya Khan tweeted on the weekend. "Nobody deserves to be attacked, humiliated, bought and sold." GitHub, an open software development platform which had hosted the app, told local media it would assist with the police investigation. —AFP

Hunger-striking Tunisia politician fighting for life

TUNIS: Tunisian former justice minister Nouredine Bhiri, who has been refusing food or medication since his arrest last week, is fighting for his life, a support group said yesterday. Bhiri, who was arrested by plainclothes officers on Friday and later accused of possible "terrorism" offences, suffers from several pre-existing health conditions. The Islamist-inspired Ennahdha party, of which he is deputy chairman, played a central role in Tunisian politics until a power grab by President Kais Saied last year.

"At the moment, medical sources say he is between life and death," Ennahdha ex-lawmaker Samir Dilou told reporters, adding that his wife and children were on standby. "Those who ordered his kidnapping must assume their responsibilities," he added, referring to Saied and his interior minister, Taoufik Charfeddine, who ordered Bhiri's arrest.

Another member of Bhiri's support committee, Abderrazek Kilani, said the former minister was suffering from kidney problems, as well as a longstanding heart condition, diabetes and hypertension, but was still refusing food or medicines. A previous alarm sounded by Ennahdha about Bhiri's health was discounted by Tunisia's independent national body for the prevention of torture (INPT) after it visited him late on Sunday.

But the INPT could not confirm the validity of the latest concerns. Three of its doctors were due to see him later Wednesday, the INPT's Lotfi Ezzedine told AFP. Saied on July 25 sacked the Ennahdha-supported government and suspended parliament, presenting himself as the ultimate interpreter of the constitution. He later took steps to rule by decree, and in early December vowed to press on with reforms to the political system.

Tunisia was the only democracy to emerge from the Arab Spring revolts of a decade ago, but civil society groups and Saied's opponents have expressed fear of a slide back to authoritarianism after the 2011 revolution that toppled longtime dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Human Rights Watch warned late last month that Tunisian authorities were using "repressive" dictatorship-era laws to snuff out criticism of the president. —AFP