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ALGIERS: Algerian students demonstrate at Algiers' school of medicine against ailing President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's bid for a fifth term. — AFP

Anger brews as Bouteflika bids for 5th term

Protesters dismiss Bouteflika's promises as an 'insult'

ALGIERS: Algerians yesterday dismissed President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's promise to quit early if re-elected for a fifth time and said they were ready for new protests seeking his resignation. The ailing leader, who suffered a stroke in 2013, vowed in a letter read out on state television late Sunday to organize a "national conference" that would set a date for further polls which he would not contest.

"I pledge not to be a candidate in that election which will ensure I am succeeded in undeniable conditions of serenity, freedom and transparency," the letter read. "I listened and heard the cry from the hearts of protesters and in particular the thousands of young people who questioned me about the future of our homeland", it said.

His message—followed by the formal submission of his candidacy for the April 18 poll by his campaign manager Abdelghani Zaalane—failed to win hearts as new protests hit the capital Algiers and other cities. In central Algiers hundreds of mostly young demonstrators rallied peacefully overnight Sunday and into the early hours of yesterday as a helicopter buzzed overhead and police deployed gradually across the city. Similar protests were reported in other cities across the North African country overnight.

As the week unfolded yesterday, residents of the capital told AFP they were already planning for more protests as they dismissed Bouteflika's promises as an "insult". Bouteflika "thinks we're idiots. We said no (to him). And 'we' are a people 42-million strong," said



Local newspapers express their fury

Karim, a 22-year-old unemployed man who declined to give his surname. Mohammed, a 69-year-old retired man, insisted he was ready to take part in his "first ever" demonstration next Friday. "They want us to believe that he (Bouteflika) is the Messiah, a prophet, that there is no one else who can save this country," he said.

'Contempt'

Local newspapers also expressed their fury, with Al-Watan daily saying Bouteflika's bid for a fifth term showed "contempt" for the tens of thousands of Algerians who have taken to the streets since February 22 calling for him to resign. Liberte newspaper said Bouteflika's promises to serve a shorter term were merely a "maneuver" to placate the people "until he takes charge again". But El-Moudjahid daily, a mouthpiece of the government, said in an editorial that Bouteflika's pledge showed that he was "placing the dignity and interests of his compatriots and Algeria before anything else".

The president, who has rarely been seen in public since suffering a stroke, has been in Switzerland since February 24 for what the presidency described as "routine medical tests". There were no legal requirements for him to submit his candidacy in person and it was handed in by his campaign manager Zaalane just before a midnight deadline Sunday. Zaalane claimed that Bouteflika—who has ruled since 1999—had the backing of 19,700 national and local elected representatives and of 5.86 million voters. Their signed affidavits of support were brought Sunday night to the Constitutional Council—where presidential bids are for-

mally lodged—by the truckloads.

'Go away'

Hours earlier students demonstrating in central Algiers chanted "Bouteflika go away" and police fired water cannon to prevent some from reaching the Constitutional Council. Similar rallies took place in several cities across the oil-rich North African country and as far as France and Montreal in Canada. "Out out," shouted crowds in the Place de la Republique, central Paris, where protesters waved placards and some wrapped themselves in Algerian flags.

Protesters in Algeria have been mobilized by calls on social media, as many young people struggle to find jobs in a country where half the population is under 30. Bouteflika was the eighth candidate to register Sunday for the April poll. The others included retired general Ali Ghediri—an independent who was the first to announce he would run and has promised change, but whose popularity remains unknown. Bouteflika's former prime minister and key rival Ali Benflis announced Sunday he would not run in the race describing the upcoming election as no longer relevant because it was void of competition. The council has until March 14 to accept or reject the presidential bids. —AFP

Modi and Imran bask after 'good' Kashmir crisis

NEW DELHI: As tempers cool after an alarming confrontation between India and Pakistan, analysts say their leaders have emerged stronger—with Narendra Modi basking in his nationalist credentials and Imran Khan cast as a peacemaker. Some 400,000 people have signed petitions for Khan, the former playboy cricketer and prime minister since August, to get a Nobel prize, while Modi's political stock has also risen ahead of looming elections.

Kashmir has been split between India and Pakistan since 1947, and two of the Asian nations' three wars have been over the Muslim-majority mountainous territory. An insurgency since the late 1980s—stoked by Islamabad, New Delhi says—in the part of Kashmir that India administers has killed tens of thousands of people, most of them civilians. On February 14 a suicide bombing claimed by a Pakistan-based militant group killed 40 Indian troops. Twelve days later Indian aircraft hit what New Delhi called a terrorist training camp deep inside Pakistan. In aerial skirmishes over Kashmir the next day, at least one Indian jet was shot down and its pilot captured by Pakistan. India said it also downed a Pakistani aircraft, a claim Islamabad denied.

'Peace gesture'

As the world held its breath, Khan, 66, made the surprise announcement that the captured pilot, handlebar-moustached Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman, would be freed in a "peace gesture". Deadly shelling



NEW DELHI: Indian demonstrators hold a placard as they form a human chain with others during an anti-war demonstration called by pacifist organizations in New Delhi yesterday. — AFP

over the de-facto frontier and clashes between Indian security forces and militants notwithstanding, Abhinandan's release on Friday looks to have taken the sting out of the standoff for now.

Khan's actions disarmed his opponents in parliament and on social media alike, with The News daily noting a "rare bonhomie... between government and opposition". Assuming it was Khan's decision to free the pilot—never a given in a country where the military plays such an outsized role—"it was the first correct one of (Khan's) political career", tweeted Gul Bukhari, a columnist who strongly opposes the government. Modi "looks like a war-mongering minuscule leader, while the Pakistani prime

minister looks like a statesman," said analyst Mosharaf Zaidi. Fahd Husain, a leading analyst and executive director of The Express Tribune, told AFP he has been "very pleasantly surprised" by Khan's attitude.

"It would have been very easy for him to go the aggressive route. People would have applauded it", he said. Zaidi said, however, that once the dust settles, politics will be back with a vengeance. "Pakistan has many problems: education, water, etc. And Imran Khan is the prime minister of all these problems", he added. Huma Yusuf, from the Wilson Center, cautioned that the challenge of initiating dialogue with India remains. "This incident has been tactfully handled, but the India-Pak relation has gone worse, no matter how well Imran Khan has handled it," she added.

Modi talked tough

No one is putting Modi forward for a Nobel but his tub-thumping rhetoric has won him some much-needed political points before India goes to the polls in a few weeks. Contrasting the more conciliatory sounding Khan, Modi has talked tough, saying that his "new India" would "fight as one" and deliver a "jaw-breaking response". Even doubts about the efficacy of the air strikes inside Pakistan and the embarrassing shooting down of the pilot have failed to dampen the national enthusiasm for Modi's response. The opposition Congress party—which before the crisis was looking increasingly confident ahead of the election—criticized only how it was kept out of the loop, but not the air raid itself. Omar Abdullah, a former chief minister of Jammu and Kashmir as well as a Modi critic, was full of praise. "That's a strike deep inside Pakistan and is hugely embarrassing for (Pakistan)," he tweeted. Tavleen Singh, a veteran journalist, also lavished praise on the prime minister. — AFP

So far apart: India, Pakistan engage in war of counter-claim

NEW DELHI: An air strike by Indian warplanes inside Pakistan last week, and a subsequent retaliatory attack by the Pakistani air force, pushed the nuclear-armed neighbors to the brink of another war, but also triggered a fight over the truth about events. Below is a look at claims and counter claims from both sides. They disagree on most aspects.

Pulwama attack

The escalation in tension came after a suicide car bombing killed 40 paramilitary troops in Pulwama in Indian-administered Kashmir, a mountainous region also claimed by Pakistan, on Feb 14. India blames Pakistan for the attack, which was claimed by a Pakistan-based militant group Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), and says it has provided Pakistan with proof. India's foreign ministry said in a statement on Feb. 27 that a dossier was handed over to Pakistan with "specific details of JeM complicity in Pulwama terror attack and the presence of JeM terror camps and its leadership in Pakistan".

Pakistan has denied the accusation, saying it had nothing to do with the Pulwama bombing, which came right before a high-profile visit by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to Islamabad on Feb 17.

Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan told parliament on Feb 28: "We had such an important visit of the Saudi crown prince coming up. We knew that they would invest, there were contracts. Which country would sabotage such an important event by conducting a terror attack?"

Air strike impact

India said its warplanes struck a JeM training camp near the Pakistani town of Balakot in the early hours of Feb 26, acting on intelligence that the militant group was planning another suicide attack. "In this operation, a very large number of JeM terrorists, trainers, senior commanders and groups of jihadis who were being trained for fideyean action were eliminated," India's Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale said in a briefing after the air strike. Fideyean is a term used to describe Islamist militants willing to fight to the death.

Pakistan acknowledged that Indian jets had crossed into its territory, but denied they had hit anything substantial. Under forced hasty withdrawal, Indian aircraft "released payload which had free fall in open area. No infrastructure got hit, no casualties", the Pakistan military spokesman, Major General Asif Ghafoor, said in a tweet. In New Delhi, a senior government official told reporters that at least 300 militants had been killed, although India's defense forces have since said they are unable to provide any detail on the number of casualties. "We hit our target," the chief of the Indian air force (IAF), BS Dhanoa, said yesterday. "The air force doesn't calculate casualty numbers, the government does that." — Reuter