

International

Series of rockets hits Afghanistan capital, killing one, wounding two

Despite peace talks, Taliban attacks surge across Afghanistan

KABUL: A series of rockets struck Kabul yesterday, killing one person and wounding two, officials said, the second such attack to rock the Afghan capital in less than a month. Violence has surged across Afghanistan in recent months, with several deadly attacks carried out in Kabul, despite the Taliban and the government engaging in peace talks since September 12 in Qatar.

"This morning, 10 rockets were fired from the Labe Jar neighborhood of Kabul," interior ministry spokesman Tariq Arian told reporters. He said three rockets landed near Kabul airport and seven in residential areas, leaving one civilian dead and two wounded. No group has claimed responsibility for the attack so far and the Taliban denied any involvement. The barrage of rockets yesterday was the second such attack in less than a month in Kabul. On November 21, eight people were killed and 31 were wounded when 23 rockets hit the capital in an attack claimed by the Islamic State group. IS has also claimed two brutal attacks on educational centers in the capital that killed mostly students, including one on Kabul University during which gunmen sprayed classrooms with bullets.

Authorities blamed the attacks on educational centers on the Haqqani network, an affiliate of the Taliban. Afghan Vice President Amrullah Saleh said on his Facebook page on Saturday that he had

received a warning from IS that it would "transform Kabul into a slaughterhouse for Shiites" if any of the jihadist group's militants arrested by government forces were executed.

In recent months, Saleh and his aides have pushed for public trials of "terrorists" arrested in connection with deadly attacks and for those found guilty to be hanged publicly. IS has regularly claimed attacks targeting the minority Shiite Hazara community in Afghanistan.

Yesterday, in a separate statement, the interior ministry said attacks such as yesterday's were aimed at "soft targets". "The enemies of the people of Afghanistan have intensified the violence," it said.

"But they have failed to capture districts and they have lost in the battlefields, so they have resorted to hitting at soft targets," it said. Violence has surged amid an ongoing withdrawal of US troops as President Donald Trump pushes to end America's longest war. In November, the Pentagon said it would pull 2,000 troops out of Afghanistan, speeding up the timeline established in a February agreement between Washington and the Taliban that envisions a full withdrawal by May 2021. That deal also stipulates that the Taliban will not target key cities in the country, although Afghan authorities have blamed them for such attacks. —AFP



KABUL: Onlookers watch a municipal worker clean and remove debris along a street after multiple rockets were fired in the Afghan capital Kabul yesterday. —AFP

Indian farmers, police in road showdowns

NEW DELHI: Indian police stopped farmers blocking major highways and taking over more roads into the capital yesterday as a two-week campaign against market reform laws intensified. Police deployed in large numbers stopped groups of hundreds of farmers from blocking the main highways from Delhi to the northern cities of Agra—the home of the Taj Mahal—and Jaipur.

Some farmers were detained on the expressway to Agra while other groups took over at least two toll booths and let cars and trucks pass without paying. Thousands of farmers have already blocked two key roads into Delhi and tried to take over more Saturday but were again stopped by police who put up security cordons.

Farmers squatted in the service lane at Ghazipur

on the edge of Delhi chanting slogans against the right wing government. Farmers' leaders and ministers have held several rounds of talks but they have broken down without agreement.

Agriculture unions want three laws which allow farmers to sell their produce on free markets to be repealed and a decades-old guaranteed minimum price system to be maintained.

The government has said it is only ready to make some amendments. Food and Consumer Affairs Minister Piyush Goyal said Friday that the protests had been hijacked by "Maoist elements" but Prime Minister Narendra Modi sought to reassure farmers that the changes would boost their incomes.

"Reforms will help draw investment in the agriculture sector and benefit farmers," he told an industry body yesterday. "The aim of all government reforms is to make farmers prosperous. When farmers prosper, the country will prosper." Economists say reforms are needed in the rural sector which provides jobs for about 70 percent of the 1.3 billion population but only contributes about 15 percent of the \$2.7-trillion economy. Farmers leaders say the reforms will only benefit



AMRITSAR: Students hold placards as they shout slogans in support of farmers during a protest against the recent agricultural reforms in Amritsar yesterday. —AFP

big corporations who will be allowed to buy produce. Their protest has been backed by some Indian diaspora communities in Britain, Canada and other countries who have staged their own protests. —AFP

Why are Indian farmers protesting

NEW DELHI: As an army of resolute Indian farmers keeps up its blockade of New Delhi, Prime Minister Narendra Modi faces potentially the trickiest challenge yet to his authority and reform agenda.

With the protests entering their third week, AFP looks at the background to new farm laws, why they are sparking such opposition and Modi's limited options.

*** What is the state of Indian agriculture? - India's farming sector is vast and troubled. It provides a livelihood to nearly 70 percent of the country's 1.3 billion people and accounts for around 15 percent of the \$2.7-trillion economy.**

The "Green Revolution" of the 1970s turned India from a country facing regular food shortages into one with a surplus—and a major exporter. But for the past few decades, farm incomes have remained largely stagnant and the sector is in sore need of

investment and modernization.

More than 85 percent of farmers have less than two hectares (five acres) of land. Fewer than one in a hundred farmers own over 10 hectares, according to a 2015-16 agriculture ministry survey. India hands out an estimated \$32 billion in subsidies to farmers annually, according to the finance ministry.

***How are farmers coping?**

Water shortages, floods and increasingly erratic weather caused by climate change, as well as debt, have taken a heavy toll on farmers. According to a Punjab government report in 2017, the northern state will use up all its groundwater resources by 2039. More than 300,000 farmers have killed themselves since the 1990s. Nearly 10,300 did so in 2019, according to the latest official figures.

Farmers and their workers are also abandoning agriculture in droves — 2,000 of them every day according to the last census in 2011.

***What did Modi promise?**

Indian governments have long made big promises to farmers—a crucial vote bank—and Modi is no exception, vowing to double their incomes by 2022. In September, parliament passed three laws

that enabled farmers to sell to any buyer they chose, rather than to commission agents at state-controlled markets. These markets were set up in the 1950s to stop the exploitation of farmers and pay a minimum support price (MSP) for certain produce.

The system has led to farmers sometimes growing crops unsuited to the local climate, such as thirsty rice in Punjab, and can be fertile ground for corruption. But many farmers see the MSP as a vital safety net, and fear being unable to compete with large farms and being paid low prices by big corporations.

"The laws will harm the farmers and in turn destroy our livelihood," said Sukhwinder Singh, a farm worker who cycled 400 kilometers (250 miles) to the protests.

"Land, cattle and farmers will be enslaved by rich people. This government wants to finish us," he said.

***What can Modi do?**

Modi has drawn fire before—a disastrous withdrawal of large banknotes in 2016, for example—but his popularity has held up, winning a landslide re-election in 2019. From late 2019, there were months of protests against a citizenship law imposed by Modi's Hindu-nationalist

BJP government that was seen as discriminatory to Muslims.

But the BJP, with its clout in traditional and social media, was able to depict the demonstrators as "anti-nationals" before COVID-19 eventually snuffed out the protests. Modi, 70, has tried to brush off the current agitation as being stoked by an opportunistic opposition "misleading" the farmers.

Some in his party have upped the ante by branding the protesters—many of whom are Sikhs—as "hooligans, Sikh separatists and anti-nationals".

But with the farmers, it is different. They enjoy widespread support among Indians and ignoring them clashes with Modi's self-styled image as a champion of the poor. In rural areas, where 70 percent of Indians live, there is already a growing perception that Modi is cozy with big business and billionaire industrialists such as Mukesh Ambani, Asia's richest person. "There are many things which are outdated in the agriculture sector. But reforms cannot be pushed like this," Arati Jerath, a political analyst, told AFP. "This is so far the biggest challenge to the government. It will have to find a way to walk back and save face at the same time." —AFP

China virus cases on Russia border spark lockdowns, tests

BEIJING: China has put one northern city in lockdown and launched citywide coronavirus testing in another, after two local infections involving workers at a port and trade zone respectively, authorities have said. There was one new case each in Dongning and Suifenhe, which both sit on the country's border with Russia.

In Dongning, a 40-year-old maintenance worker at a port tested positive on Thursday, triggering the latest measures. Officials there said yesterday it would enter "wartime mode"—temporarily suspending public bus services and road transport, while requiring anyone leaving the city to produce a neg-

ative Covid-19 test from the preceding 24 hours.

Schools will suspend classes and dine-in will be banned at restaurants, while in higher-risk areas only one member of each household will be allowed to leave the home once every two days to buy daily necessities—for no longer than two hours each time. In the Suifenhe case, a 39-year-old man who works as a loading and unloading worker at a trade zone tested positive. Both cities on Friday announced the launch of citywide testing, expected to be completed in three days. China—where the virus first surfaced late last year—has largely brought domestic transmission under control but recently reported local outbreaks in several cities.

State media blamed the recent clusters on imports of frozen food and other shipments. After a recent outbreak in Chengdu, officials said the virus was found on food stored in an elderly couple's fridge. There is currently no evidence that people can catch COVID-19 from food or food packaging, according to the World Health Organization. —AFP



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Chile awaits total eclipse of the sun as COVID curbs rise

SANTIAGO: Chileans will turn their eyes to the sky tomorrow to admire a total eclipse of the sun, but

unlike last year's phenomenon their numbers will be severely reduced by coronavirus restrictions.

Some 300,000 people turned out in July 2019 in the Atacama desert in Chile's north, home to several observatories. Tomorrow it will be the turn of the Araucania region in the south that is home to the Mapuche indigenous community to observe the eclipse. Their ability to do so will be severely hampered by the latest measures announced on Thursday by the government, restricting the move-

ment of people outside of the Santiago metropolitan area after a spike in positive virus cases.

To observe the phenomenon, when the moon passes between the Earth and the sun, entirely blocking the latter, one needs to be in the exact 90-kilometer long area that will enjoy the full effect. And they will only have two minutes, nine seconds at around 1:00 pm (1600 GMT) to see the eclipse, framed by the backdrop of the Villarrica volcano—one of the most active in the country. —AFP

News in brief

Armenian separatists hurt

YEREVAN, Armenia: Separatist officials in the breakaway region of Nagorno-Karabakh said yesterday that three fighters were wounded in a skirmish with Azerbaijani forces, undermining a recent peace deal brokered by Russia. The defense ministry in the ethnically Armenian province said in a statement that Azerbaijani troops attacked Friday evening and that "three Armenian servicemen were injured during the ensuing gunfire". It added that the fighters were in a stable condition and an investigation into the incident was under way. Six weeks of fighting between separatists backed by Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region ended last month after the two sides agreed to a peace deal. —AFP

HK media tycoon appears in court

HONG KONG: Hong Kong media tycoon and Beijing critic Jimmy Lai appeared in court yesterday morning to face a charge under the national security law that could put him in jail for life. He is accused of colluding with foreign countries, by calling on overseas governments to sanction Hong Kong and China in response to the crackdown on pro-democracy activism in the city. Lai, 73, is the most high-profile figure charged under the sweeping law, which has targeted the city's pro-democracy movement but brought a semblance of calm to the finance hub after months of often-violent protests. The police's new national security department charged him Friday with "collusion with a foreign country or with external elements to endanger national security" under the security law. —AFP

South Korea virus cases spike

SEOUL: South Korea yesterday reported its highest daily number of coronavirus cases so far, with a surge centered on the capital region sparking fears the country could lose control of the spread. Officials announced 950 new infections after several days reporting numbers ranging from about 500 to 600. Some 669 were reported in the greater Seoul area on Saturday, according to the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency, prompting worries about a major outbreak in the densely populated area-home to half the country's 52 million people. "This is the last hurdle before the roll-out of vaccines and treatments," President Moon Jae-in said in a statement, calling the situation "very grave." —AFP

Peru suspends trials of Chinese vaccine

LIMA: Peru has temporarily suspended clinical trials of a Covid vaccine made by Chinese drug giant Sinopharm after detecting neurological problems in one of its test volunteers. The National Institute of Health said Friday that it had decided to interrupt the trial after a volunteer had difficulty moving their arms, according to local media. "Several days ago we signaled, as we are required, to the regulatory authorities that one of our participants (in trials) presented neurological symptoms which could correspond to a condition called Guillain-Barre syndrome," said chief researcher German Malaga in comments to the press. —AFP

Canada, US border closed until Jan 21

OTTAWA: The longest international border in the world, between Canada and the United States, will remain closed until January 21 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced Friday. "Canada and the United States agreed today to keep our shared border closed until January 21," Trudeau told a news conference. The border was initially closed in March to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus. The closure has been renewed monthly since then. Only trade in goods and merchandise and essential travel are allowed. A second wave of COVID-19 infections in Canada—with a total of nearly 450,000 cases reported as of Friday—has forced several regions to reintroduce pandemic measures. —AFP