



Jordan votes in election clouded by pandemic

'Unfair surveillance'? Online exam software sparks global revolt



(Left) A woman holds the national flag and a portrait of Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev as people celebrate in the streets of the capital Baku yesterday after Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed a ceasefire over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region. (Right) Armenians react as they protest against the country's agreement to end fighting with Azerbaijan outside the government headquarters in Yerevan yesterday. — AFP

Armenia, Azerbaijan agree to peace deal

Russian peacekeepers head to Nagorno-Karabakh after ceasefire

YEREVAN: Hundreds of Russian peacekeepers were deploying to Nagorno-Karabakh yesterday after Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed to a peace deal to end weeks of fierce fighting over the disputed region. The Moscow-brokered agreement, which saw a ceasefire take effect at 1:00 am local time (2100 GMT), came after a string of Azerbaijani victories in its fight to retake the ethnic Armenian enclave.

It sparked celebrations in Azerbaijan but fury in Armenia, where protesters took to the streets to denounce the country's leadership for losses in the territory, which broke from Azerbaijan's control during a war in the early 1990s. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the deal in the early hours of yesterday.

Pashinyan described the agreement as "unspeakably painful for me and for our people", while Aliyev said it amounted to a "capitulation". The full text of the deal was released several hours later and showed clear gains for Azerbaijan. Its forces will retain control over areas seized in the fighting, including the key town of Shusha, while Armenia agreed to a timetable to withdraw from large parts of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Nearly 2,000 peacekeepers

A Russian force of 1,960 military personnel and 90 armored personnel carriers will deploy to the region as peacekeepers, for a renewable five-year mission. The Russian defense ministry said yesterday that 10 Il-76 aircraft carrying the first peacekeepers and their equipment had taken off from an airfield in Russia. Aliyev said that Turkey, a key ally, would also be involved in peacekeeping efforts but there was no mention of it in the agreement.

Armenian defense ministry spokeswoman Shushan

Stepanyan said on Twitter that the situation was calm in the region at 6:00 am local time and that "combat operations on the whole frontline are suspended". The conflict over the territory - which has simmered for decades despite international efforts to reach an accord - erupted into fresh fighting in late September.

More than 1,400 people have been confirmed killed, including dozens of civilians, but the actual death toll is believed to be significantly higher. Azerbaijani forces made steady gains over the weeks of fighting, sweeping across the southern flank of the region and eventually into its heartland. A turning point came on Sunday when Aliyev announced that his forces had captured Shusha, the region's strategically vital second-largest town.

Anger in Armenia

Shusha sits on cliffs overlooking Nagorno-Karabakh's main city Stepanakert and on the main road to Armenia, which backs the separatists. Armenian officials had initially denied the town had been taken and the announcement of the deal caused outrage, with angry protesters storming the government headquarters in the capital Yerevan where they ransacked offices and broke windows. Crowds also entered parliament and demanded Pashinyan's resignation. Police had retaken control of both buildings yesterday but there were calls for demonstrations against Pashinyan, who came to power leading a wave of peaceful protests in 2018.

In the Azerbaijani capital Baku joyful residents took to the streets chanting "Karabakh! Karabakh!" and waving Azerbaijani and Turkish flags. "I am very happy, congratulations to the motherland, I hope these lands will be ours forever," said Elnar Hajiyev, waving an Azerbaijani flag as passing cars honked in celebration.

Karabakh declared independence nearly 30 years ago but the declaration has not been recognised internationally, even by Armenia, and it remains a part of Azerbaijan under international law.

Attempts at ceasefires brokered by France, Russia and the United States - who together lead the "Minsk Group" that sought for years to end the conflict - repeatedly failed over recent weeks. The agreement announced Tuesday made no mention of the status of the Armenian-populated areas of Nagorno-Karabakh or of the format of future negotiations to settle the conflict.

Turkey hails 'significant gains'

Azerbaijan has been pushing for Turkey's involvement in a settlement and the new deal came after Putin spoke with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Saturday. "Our dear Azerbaijan achieved significant gains in the field and at the (negotiating) table. I wholeheartedly congratulate this blessed success," Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu tweeted yesterday.

The agreement also provides for Armenia to agree to a transport corridor linking Azerbaijan with its Nakhchivan exclave on the border with Turkey. The ceasefire deal came just hours after Azerbaijan admitted to accidentally shooting down a Russian military helicopter flying in Armenia near Nakhchivan.

Moscow's defense ministry said two crew members were killed when the Mi-24 helicopter was hit close to the border with Azerbaijan. Baku quickly apologized and blamed the incident on the "tense situation in the region and increased combat readiness" of its forces. Russia has a military pact with Armenia but also good ties with oil-rich Azerbaijan, both ex-Soviet countries that gained their independence with the 1991 collapse of the USSR. — AFP



Christopher Miller

Trump fires defense chief

WASHINGTON: Donald Trump fired Defense Secretary Mark Esper on Monday, further unsettling a government facing uncertainty over the US president's refusal to concede election defeat to Democrat Joe Biden. Coming with just 10 weeks left in his White House tenure, the move heightened concerns that Trump might take aim at other national security officials with whom he has expressed disappointment.

According to multiple reports, he is also believed to be considering dismissing FBI Director Chris Wray and CIA Director Gina Haspel, angered that they did not support his battle for reelection. The Washington Post reported that Trump had already removed the official in charge of the program that produces the government's climate change reports, a move that would allow him to be replaced by someone with views closer to Trump's skepticism about global warming. Esper's firing drew warnings from senior politicians and former officials to not further destabilize the government. Senator Mark Warner, the senior Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee, said he was "deeply troubled" by Esper's removal. "The last thing that our country needs is additional upheaval in the institutions designed to protect our national security," Warner said in a statement.

"President Trump must not invite further volatility by removing any Senate-confirmed intelligence or national security officials during his time left in office," he said. Retired admiral James Stavridis, the former NATO supreme allied commander, said that Trump is "playing with fire with our nation's security". "If Trump moves on to fire the head of the CIA and the head of the FBI, both true professionals and patriots, we are going to be in uncharted waters for the next 90 days," Stavridis wrote on Twitter.

Below the radar

Esper was Trump's fourth defense chief in four years, and his removal capped a stormy relationship between the Pentagon and the president. Like his predecessors, Esper, 56, sought to fly below the political radar to avoid Trump's ire. But they ultimately collided over White House pressure to deploy federal troops to quash civil unrest, and Trump's desire for a rapid withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan before the defense establishment felt it was safe. "Mark Esper has been terminated," Trump declared abruptly on Twitter Monday. "I would like to thank him for his service."

A West Point classmate of Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Esper worked for years in the defense industry before joining the Pentagon as army secretary in 2017. He became defense secretary in July 2019, and pursued fundamental reforms to the massive Pentagon bureaucracy and sought to reshape the US global defense posture to focus on China.

Esper accommodated some of Trump's wishes, launching a separate Space Command and, when Congress would not fund it, moving billions of dollars from weapons and base maintenance programs for construction of a wall on the US-Mexico border to block illegal immigrants. He also sharply cut US forces in Syria as Trump sought to live up to his 2016 election pledge to bring back troops from overseas. But even as he skirted controversy, Esper could not avoid colliding with the commander in chief. After sometimes violent anti-racism protests spread across the country following the May police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Trump sought support from the Pentagon for deploying regular troops. —AFP



MANAMA: Ebrahim Nonoo, head of Bahrain's Jewish community, stands at the entrance of the only synagogue in the kingdom on Monday. — AFP

Jews in Bahrain mark Kristallnacht

MANAMA: Bahraini Jews marked on Monday the 82nd anniversary of Kristallnacht, also known as the Night of Broken Glass, for the first time since the Arab nation normalized ties with Israel last month. The disused synagogue in Manama - the only one in the kingdom, which is home to some 50 Bahraini Jews - was illuminated at night "to shine light over the darkness of hate", organizers said.

It is the first commemoration of its kind in Muslim-majority Bahrain, since it followed the United Arab Emirates' example earlier this year and agreed to normalize ties with Israel in a US-brokered deal. Kristallnacht marks the 1938 torching and ransacking of synagogues and Jewish-owned businesses across Germany by Nazi mobs.

It is held this year under the "Let There Be Light" hashtag, a global virtual campaign against anti-semitism, racism, intolerance and hatred, organizers International March of the Living said. Ebrahim Nonoo, head of Bahrain's Jewish community, said the synagogue in Manama has not been functional since 1948 but plans are underway to renovate it and re-open it to worshippers next year. "We have had a long history of connection with Jewish people, but we are Bahraini first," he told AFP. Nonoo, a former member of the consultative Shura Council, said it was a "great honor" for his community to take part in Monday's event. The UAE and Bahrain became the third and fourth Arab states to establish relations with Israel, following Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994. Sudan has also followed suit. —AFP

Myanmar Muslim MP-elect vows to be rights champion

YANGON: After five years without a single Muslim MP, Myanmar is in need of someone to help fight for the rights of oppressed minorities, says Sithu Maung as he celebrates his election to parliament. The 33-year-old was one of just two Muslims out of more than 1,100 candidates for Aung San Suu Kyi's ruling National League for Democracy (NLD) party - up from zero in the last election in 2015. Muslims number about four percent of the national population and suffer particularly high levels of discrimination.

Sithu Maung sensed victory was on the cards after seeing voters' reactions to him at the polling station, but was overwhelmed to scoop up a decisive 80 percent of the vote in his downtown Yangon constituency. "People applauded me, shouting my name from their apartments when I passed," the 33-year-old told AFP at his modest studio flat in a crumbling colonial-era building.

Official overall results are not expected until later in the week, but the NLD is confident it has won by a landslide, prompting street celebrations from thousands of supporters despite coronavirus fears. Sithu Maung's constituency is one of the most ethnically diverse in the country with around 30,000 residents almost evenly divided between Buddhists and Muslims as well as Rakhine, Chinese and Indian-origin minorities. "I'll work for people of all religions, particularly those who are discriminated against and oppressed or deprived of human rights," he promised.

'Mixed blood'

But Sithu Maung refused to be drawn publicly on the issue of the stateless Rohingya, whose persecution in Myanmar has cast a pall over his party leader Suu Kyi in the international community's eyes. Military operations forced out hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims in 2017 in violence that now sees the country facing genocide charges; 600,000 more remain inside Myanmar living in what rights groups brand as apartheid conditions.

But Muslims of other ethnic heritage, officially accepted as citizens, also commonly face discrimination. Like many, Sithu Maung had to wait years to

obtain an ID card that labeled him as "mixed blood" ethnicity, demoting him to different queues in government offices that make people particularly vulnerable to corruption. "People who haven't experienced it just can't understand what it's like," he said. With hardline Buddhist nationalist sentiment running high, he was then passed over as a potential NLD candidate for the 2015 election. No Muslims at all were elected to parliament then.

Thick skin

Even in this year's election, 23 percent of Muslim candidates were rejected, compared with just 0.3 percent for other religious groups, according to International Crisis Group watchdog. Sithu Maung described how he was attacked from all sides when his nomination was announced. "People spread disinformation, calling me a terrorist and saying I wanted Arabic to be taught in schools," the MP-elect added. "Even some Muslims criticized me, accusing me of not praying enough and of being atheist, or non-conformist."

He said years of building up thick skin has prepared him well for his time as an MP - and he will not be the only Muslim in parliament. NLD party stalwart Win Mya Mya, 71, comfortably won her seat in Mandalay too. Yangon-based analyst David Mathieson said he was encouraged to see the pair's victory but said the NLD needed to address "deeply rooted discrimination against Muslims and other scapegoated minorities". He predicted, however, that the party's fear this would "dilute the NLD's support" would likely deter any attempts. Sithu Maung is determined not just to be seen to be representing Muslims. "If any of my constituents are ever degraded or face injustice, I'll defend them." — AFP



Sithu Maung