

## International

# Rockets target Eritrea as Ethiopia leader resists calls for dialogue

## Heavy shelling hits capital of Ethiopia's Tigray

**ADDIS ABABA:** Heavy shelling struck the capital of Ethiopia's Tigray region yesterday, the local government and humanitarian sources said, as the city of half a million braced for an attack against leaders of the regional ruling party. Ethiopia's military "has started hitting with heavy weaponry and artillery the center of Mekele", the local government said in a statement carried by Tigrayan media—a claim confirmed by two humanitarian officials with staff in the city.

"The Tigray regional state calls upon all who have a clear conscience, including the international community, to condemn the artillery and warplane attacks and massacres being committed," the statement said. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, winner of last year's Nobel Peace Prize, announced November 4 he had ordered military operations against Tigray's ruling party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF).

More than three weeks of fierce fighting has left thousands dead "including many civilians as well as security forces", the International Crisis Group said Friday. Tens of thousands of refugees have streamed over the border into Sudan, and rockets launched from Tigray targeted the capital of neighboring Eritrea for a second time Friday night, exacerbating fears the conflict could draw in the wider Horn of Africa region.

Abiy announced Thursday that he had ordered a "final" offensive on TPLF leaders, and Ethiopia's military says it has encircled the city. A communications blackout in Tigray has made it difficult to verify claims from both sides about how the fighting is going.

A spokesperson for a crisis committee formed in response to hostilities in Tigray did not immediately

respond to a request for comment yesterday about reported shelling in Mekele, which has already been hit by air strikes. A spokesperson for Abiy's office referred AFP to past statements indicating military operations would be undertaken "strategically" to avoid undue harm to civilians.

Eritrea's capital came under fire from Ethiopia's breakaway Tigray region Friday, raising fears that Ethiopia's internal conflict could spread as leader Abiy Ahmed resisted calls for dialogue. Global concern remains centered on the half a million residents of Mekele, Tigray's regional capital, which the army says it has encircled ahead of the threatened attack. World leaders and human rights groups have warned such a strike could violate rules of war and were calling for urgent mediation.

Pope Francis was among those worried about the intensifying fighting, growing loss of life and displacement, Vatican media head Matteo Bruni said Friday. Abiy announced military operations in Tigray on November 4 after months of friction between his government and the TPLF, which dominated Ethiopian politics for nearly three decades before Abiy took office in 2018.

The prime minister has refused to negotiate with the TPLF and dismissed calls for dialogue as "interference" in Ethiopia's internal affairs. On Friday he met with three African ex-leaders—Joaquim Chissano of Mozambique, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia and Kgalema Motlanthe of South Africa—dispatched this week by the African Union as mediators.

### 'Enforce rule of law'

In a statement issued after their meeting in Addis Ababa, Abiy said he appreciated "this gesture and...



Ethiopian refugees who have fled the Tigray conflict, rest in the shade after arriving at a transit centre in the Sudanese border town of Hamdayit on Friday. Over 43,000 refugees have crossed into Sudan since fighting broke out in Tigray on November 4. — AFP

the steadfast commitment this demonstrates to the principle of African solutions to African problems". Even so, the government has a "constitutionally mandated responsibility to enforce rule of law in the region and across the country," his office said in a statement.

"Failure to do so would further a culture of impunity with devastating cost to the survival of the country," it said. UN chief Antonio Guterres wel-

comed the talks with the AU envoys and urged all parties to "peacefully resolve the conflict".

The UN Secretary-General also stressed the need "to ensure the protection of civilians, human rights and access for humanitarian assistance to the affected areas". The Tigrayan government, meanwhile, said Friday the federal army was bombarding towns and villages and inflicting heavy damage, although it did not specifically mention Mekele. — AFP

## Toll rises to 6 in clashes among rival Iraq protesters

**NASIRIYAH, Iraq:** The toll from clashes among rival protesters in Iraq's southern hot spot of Nasiriyah rose to six dead, medics said yesterday, as other cities imposed security measures.

Violence erupted on Friday between the dwindling members of the October 2019 anti-government protest movement and supporters of populist Shiite cleric Moqtada Sadr, who had called on his followers to hit the streets in a show of force. In the southern city of Nasiriyah, anti-government activists accused Sadrists of shooting at them and torching their tents in their main gathering place of Habboubi Square.

Clashes continued into the night, with medics reporting a total of six dead by yesterday morning,

five of them from bullet wounds, and at least 60 wounded. But on Saturday morning, anti-government protesters were already back in the square to rebuild their camp, an AFP reporter there said.

Authorities sacked the city's police chief, launched an investigation into the events and imposed an overnight curfew in Nasiriyah. Other cities also introduced security measures, with Kut and Amara further north setting new movement restrictions.

Nasiriyah was a major hub for the protest movement that erupted in October 2019 against a government seen by demonstrators as corrupt, inept and beholden to neighboring Iran.

It was also the site of one of the bloodiest incidents of the uprising, when more than three dozen died in protest-related violence on November 28 last year. The deaths sparked outrage across Iraq and prompted the resignation of then-prime minister Adel Abdel Mahdi.

His successor, Mustafa Al-Kadhemi, has sought to reach out to protesters and set June 2021 as a date for early elections—a major demand of the youth-dominated movement. — AFP



NASIRIYAH, Iraq: A demonstrator flashes V signs by burning tyres amid clashes between Iraqi anti-government protesters and supporters of firebrand Shiite cleric Moqtada Sadr, in the southern city of Nasiriyah, on Friday. — AFP

## Deported Mexican migrants dream of change under Biden

**MEXICO CITY:** Mauricio Lopez was deported to Mexico after spending most of his life in the United States. Now he hopes against the odds that Joe Biden's administration will let him return.

The 26-year-old English teacher is one of thousands of migrants known as "dreamers" who as children were taken to the US by their parents. Like many Mexicans who were expelled, in particular under outgoing President Donald Trump, Lopez is hoping that President-elect Biden will push for changes that protect undocumented migrants. "It would be good for us if he relaxes immigration laws ... if there are asylum processes, if he makes it easier for us to obtain work permits or tourist visas, since many of us have families there," he said. Lopez was deported to Mexico from North

Carolina in 2016 after he was unable to renew his residency permit under the DACA program for unauthorized immigrants brought to the United States as children.

He was deported with his mother, leaving behind a sister but joining a brother who had already been sent back to Mexico years earlier.

### Biden's hands tied?

Lopez is part of a growing number of deportees trying to integrate into a country that often feels foreign to them. Around 89,000 Mexicans were expelled from the United States in the first half of this year, according to the interior ministry.

Widespread expulsions have also occurred under Democratic administrations. About three million unauthorized immigrants were deported by



Many Mexicans who were deported from the US hope that President-elect Joe Biden will push for changes that protect undocumented migrants.

former president Barack Obama between 2009 and 2016, when Biden was vice president. Biden has signaled a break with the policies of Trump, who vowed to halt almost all immigration and expel the more than 10 million undocumented migrants estimated to

live in the United States.

The Republican sparked anger during his 2016 election campaign when he branded Mexican migrants "rapists" and drug dealers, and vowed to build a wall along the southern US border. — AFP

## IS-linked militants kill four Christians in Indonesia

**PALU, Indonesia:** Islamic State-linked extremists killed four people in a remote Christian community on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi, authorities said yesterday, with one victim beheaded and another burned to death. The group of sword-and-gun wielding attackers ambushed Lembantonga village in Central Sulawesi province Friday morning, killing several residents and torching half a dozen homes, including one used for regular prayers and services, police said.

No arrests had yet been made and the motive for the attack was not immediately clear. But authorities pointed the finger at the Sulawesi-based East Indonesia Mujahideen (MIT), one of dozens of radical groups

across the Southeast Asian archipelago that have pledged allegiance to IS.

Indonesia, the world's biggest Muslim majority nation, has long wrestled with Islamist militancy and terror attacks, while Central Sulawesi has seen intermittent violence between Christians and Muslims for decades. "We reached the conclusion that they (the attackers) were from MIT after showing pictures of its members to relatives of the victims" who witnessed the ambush, said Sigi Regency police chief Yoga Priyahutama. The makeshift church was empty at the time of the early morning attack by around eight militants, he added. "People were just in their homes when it happened," Priyahutama said.

Lembantonga village head Rifai, who like many Indonesians goes by one name, said one victim was beheaded and another was nearly decapitated. One of the other all-male victims was stabbed while a fourth was burned to death in his home, he added. — AFP

## UK testing error wrongly says 1,300 infected

**LONDON:** Over 1,300 people in Britain were inaccurately informed they were infected with coronavirus after a laboratory error at the government's NHS Test and Trace system, the Department of Health and Social Care told Reuters yesterday. "NHS Test and Trace has contacted 1,311 individuals who were incorrectly told that the result of COVID-19 tests, taken between Nov. 19 and Nov. 23, were positive. An issue with a batch of testing chemicals meant their test results were void," a department spokesman said in an emailed statement.

"Swift action was taken to notify those affected and they have been asked to take another test, and to continue to self-is-

olate if they have symptoms." The laboratory error that led to the problem was an "isolated incident" and was being investigated, the statement said. The government has announced an extra 7 billion pounds (\$9.31 billion) for its COVID-19 testing and contact tracing system as part of an expanded program of mass testing.

The NHS Test and Trace system has been heavily criticized after a series of high-profile failures since its launch earlier this year, and ministers concede it has not performed as well as they had hoped. In September, nearly 16,000 positive case records were lost from the system for several days — causing a delay in contact tracing. — Reuters

### News in brief

#### Thai protesters move to suburbs

**BANGKOK:** Thai anti-government protesters demonstrated in Bangkok's outskirts yesterday with a duck parade and speeches demanding the removal of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, a new constitution and reforms to the monarchy. Protests have been stepped up this week despite threats by Prayuth, a former junta ruler, to use all available laws against protesters who break them and charges of insulting the monarchy against several protest leaders. Hundreds of people gathered in both Nonthaburi and Bang Na, to the northwest and southeast of Bangkok respectively. — Reuters

#### HK leader has no bank account

**HONG KONG:** Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam said she has "piles of cash" at home as she has no bank account after the United States slapped sanctions on her in response to a draconian security law China imposed on the city. Lam was targeted, along with 14 other senior city officials, in the toughest US action on Hong Kong since Beijing imposed the new law on the territory in late June. The move by Washington freezes the American assets of the 15 officials and criminalizes any financial transactions in the United States. In an interview with local English TV channel HKIBC aired on Friday night, Lam said she was "using cash every day for all the things" after being sanctioned. — AFP

#### Pakistan frees left-wing activist

**ISLAMABAD:** Pakistan has freed a political activist who was serving a life sentence in the country's semi-autonomous north, part of the contested Kashmir region also claimed by India, his party told AFP Friday. Baba Jan, a left-wing political and climate activist from the Hunza Valley in northern Gilgit-Baltistan, was convicted by an anti-terrorism court for participating in political riots in 2011 and lost an appeal against his life sentence in 2016. Pakistani media reported his release came after authorities struck a deal with activists, on the heels of recent protests, to free Jan following the local elections completed on Friday. — AFP

#### 700 gang members arrested

**MEXICO CITY:** El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras have brought criminal charges against more than 700 members of cross-border criminal organizations, primarily the MS-13 and 18th Street gangs, in a US-assisted effort, the US Department of Justice said on Friday. "The US Department of Justice and our law enforcement partners in Central America are committed to continued collaboration in locating and arresting gang members and associates engaged in transnational crimes," said US Attorney General William Barr, according to the statement. The charges resulted from a one-week coordinated law enforcement action under Operation Regional Shield (ORS), a DOJ-led initiative to combat transnational organized crime that brings together authorities from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and the United States. — Reuters