



Kyrgyzstan holds election marked by voter disillusion and party splits

Thousands protest coronavirus curbs in Germany over weekend

Page 6

Page 7

Armenia-Azerbaijan fighting intensifies

Azerbaijan's second-largest city bombarded

STEPANAKERT, Azerbaijan: Armenian and Azerbaijani forces exchanged rocket fire as fighting intensified over Nagorno-Karabakh yesterday, with the breakaway region's capital and Azerbaijan's second-largest city bombarded.

Armenia said that Nagorno-Karabakh's main city Stepanakert, which has been under artillery fire since Friday, was hit again yesterday and AFP journalists said there were regular explosions and clouds of black smoke rising in parts of the city. Azerbaijan's defense ministry said Ganja, a city of more than 330,000 in western Azerbaijan, was also "under fire", while Armenian-backed separatist forces claimed to have destroyed an airbase there.

The two sides accused each other of targeting civilian areas, as the conflict appeared to be widening a week after heavy fighting broke out in the decades-old dispute over the ethnic-Armenian region.

Armenia and Azerbaijan have resisted international calls for a ceasefire and clashes have intensified in recent days, with both sides claiming victories on the front and saying they are inflicting heavy losses.

Sirens were sounding and explosions were heard at regular intervals in Stepanakert, where residents were taking shelter including several families in the basement of a church. Armenia's foreign ministry said Stepanakert and the Karabakh town of Martakert were under rocket attack and accused Azerbaijani forces of "the deliberate targeting of the civilian population".

It said the Azerbaijani air force was also involved. Drones could be heard flying over Stepanakert.

Azerbaijan said Ganja was under fire, including from areas outside of Karabakh. "Armenian forces struck Ganja with rockets from Armenian terri-

tory," said Hikmet Hajiyev, an advisor to Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev. He said Armenian forces had also used heavy artillery and rockets against the towns of Terter and Goradiz in Azerbaijan.

'Decisive moment'

Karabakh's separatist forces said they had targeted and destroyed an airbase in Ganja, but Baku denied this as a "provocation" and said civilian infrastructure and housing had been hit. Azerbaijan's ally Turkey accused Armenia of "targeting civilians" in Ganja and reiterated support for its fellow Turkic and Muslim country as "one nation, two states".

Karabakh leader Arayik Harutyunyan warned that it would now consider "military facilities in Azerbaijan's big cities" as legitimate targets. "I call on the residents of these cities to immediately leave," Harutyunyan said in a post on Facebook. Harutyunyan announced on Saturday that he was heading to the front to join the fighting. Azerbaijani officials claimed Sunday that he had been "seriously wounded" while in a bunker hit by bombing, but his office denied this.

Azerbaijan claims to have made gains in Karabakh in recent days, with its defense ministry saying that 14 settlements have been taken as well as a strategically important plateau.

In an address to the country on Saturday, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan said Armenians were facing a "decisive moment" and called for the nation to come together. Armenia on Saturday announced the deaths of 51 more separatist fighters, taking the number of reported fatalities on both sides above 240, including more than 30 civilians. Azerbaijan on Sunday said two more civilians had been killed in shelling on the southern town of Beylagan, where a journalist working



GANJA, Azerbaijan: Emergency personnel work in a damaged area of this city following a rocket strike yesterday during ongoing fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the breakaway Nagorno-Karabakh region. —AFP

with AFP saw residents picking through the rubble of destroyed homes. "I was baking bread when I heard explosions. I opened the door and saw that bombs were falling right into the yard," said one woman, showing journalists the blown-out windows and partially collapsed roof of her home.

Praying for peace

In Armenia's majority-Christian capital Yerevan, residents gathered in churches for services Sunday to pray and light candles. "The situation in the country is very critical," Aytsemik Melikyan told AFP outside the church Saint Sarkis Church. "I came to ask God for peace, for our country and our soldiers."

Russia, the United States and France—who co-chair a mediation group that has failed to bring about a political resolution to the conflict—have called for an immediate halt to the fighting.

Armenia has said it is "ready to engage" with mediators but Azerbaijan-

which considers Karabakh under Armenian occupation—says Armenian forces must fully withdraw before a ceasefire can be brokered. Karabakh's declaration of independence from Azerbaijan during the collapse of the Soviet Union sparked a war in the early 1990s that claimed 30,000 lives.

Talks to resolve the conflict have made little progress since a 1994 ceasefire agreement.

The breakaway province is not acknowledged as independent by any country—including Armenia—and Karabakh said Saturday that international recognition was "the only way towards peace and security in the region". Armenia has accused Turkey of dispatching mercenaries from Syria and Libya to the fighting—an allegation confirmed and denounced by Russia and France.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a monitoring group, says more than 70 Turkey-backed fighters have been killed in the

New Caledonia rejects independence

NOUMEA, France: The French South Pacific territory of New Caledonia narrowly rejected independence in a referendum yesterday, the archipelago's high commission said after a partial count of the votes. The anti-independence vote fell to 53.3 percent, according to the 70 percent of ballots counted, down from 56.7 percent in a previous referendum two years ago, it said.

Turnout was high at 85.5 percent, the commission said, reflecting enthusiasm of voters who had formed long queues to cast their ballots. Yesterday's referendum was part of a carefully negotiated decolonization plan agreed in 1998, which ended a deadly conflict between the mostly pro-independence indigenous Kanak population and the descendants of European settlers.

Another referendum can be held by 2022 so long as the poll is requested by at least a third of the local legislature.

Enthusiasm was high and authorities said turnout was about 80 percent an hour before voting ended—a full six points higher than in its first independence referendum held in 2018 — leaving people to form long queues to cast their ballots.

"I waited 45 minutes. It's very important for me to vote," said retiree Germaine Le Demezet in the capital Noumea. "I have children and grandchildren here, the future needs to be clear and we need to know what's going to happen to us."

It will take several hours for the votes to be tallied and the result to be announced. Yesterday's referendum is part of a carefully negotiated de-colonization plan agreed in 1998, which ended a deadly conflict between the mostly pro-independence indigenous Kanak population and the descendants of European settlers in the 1980s. That violence culminated in a bloody, drawn-out hostage crisis in 1988 that saw 19 separatists killed on one side, and six police and special forces on the other.

New Caledonians voted against independence in the referendum two years ago, with "no" securing about 57 percent. But the result marked a shift towards pro-independence sympathies, raising campaigners' hopes that this time it could manage to break free. —AFP

The Chairman, the Board Members and the employees of
Kuwait Financial Centre "Markaz"

would like to convey the highest of congratulations and blessings to

**His Highness the Amir
Sheikh Nawaf Al Ahmad Al Jaber Al Sabah**

**on the occasion of assuming the
predicate of the State**



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