

International

Kyrgyzstan detains 15 in 'coup plot' before vote

Today's vote will see 21 parties competing for 90 seats in single-chamber parliament

BISHKEK, Kyrgyzstan: Security services in Kyrgyzstan said Friday they had arrested 15 people in connection with an alleged coup plot as tensions build ahead of parliamentary elections this weekend. The poor, mountainous nation of 6.5 million people has seen repeated political chaos since gaining independence with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

On Friday, the state committee for national security said it had detained 15 people who were part of a plan to get "1,000 aggressive young people" to protest the results of the vote. "After the announcement of the results of the upcoming parliamentary elections...this group planned to organise mass protests in (the capital) Bishkek and subsequently to aggravate the situation, provoking clashes with the forces of law and order and further violent seizure of power," a statement said.

Security services "obtained irrefutable evidence of the criminal activity of a group of persons under the leadership of certain destructive political forces, including deputies of the (parliament) and former high-ranking officials."

Without naming the detained, the committee also said it had "found and seized firearms, ammunition and drugs" in a raid on the alleged group's office. Kyrgyzstan, which has seen three presidents overthrown since its independence from the Soviet

Union, hopes to avoid further instability after leader Sadyr Japarov rose to power on the back of protests over claims of vote-buying last year. The vote today will see 21 parties and hundreds of district candidates competing for 90 seats in the single-chamber parliament.

Independent candidates excluded

After rising to the presidency from a prison cell during the last post-vote crisis, Japarov pledged to hold free and fair elections. But electoral authorities have already excluded one candidate and fined another, both of whom are regarded as independent voices in the outgoing parliament.

The president was serving a sentence for hostage-taking prior to his release amid the protests over alleged vote-buying by pro-government parties last year. He has insisted that the charges were a punishment for his campaign to nationalise a key gold mine upon which the largely resource-poor economy depends.

The new administration moved in May to seize the Kumtor mine from the Canadian company that controlled it, Centerra Gold, citing environmental violations. Centerra, whose operations at Kumtor accounted for 12.5 percent of Kyrgyzstan's gross domestic product in 2020, has denied the claims and is contesting the seizure in an international court.

himself the pain of the daily commute.

"Not many people can afford to waste their time on public transport," he said. Private vehicle registrations have tripled in the last 15 years—there are now more than 13 million on the capital's roads, government figures show.

The consequences are felt year-round, with Delhi road users spending 1.5 hours more in traffic than other major Asian cities, according to the Boston Consulting Group. But come winter the daily inconvenience escalates into a full-blown public health crisis, as prevailing winds slow and the thick blanket of haze settles over the city sees a surge in hospital admissions from residents struggling to breathe.

Vehicle emissions accounted for more than half of the city air's concentration of PM2.5 — the smallest airborne particles most hazardous to human health—at the start of November. Delhi's Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) said.

'It made more sense'

A study from the centre last year showed the capital was experiencing a steady decline in public transit ridership. Infrastructure has improved since the turn of the century, when Delhi inaugurated the first links in an underground rail network that now spans more than 250 stations and stretches into neighbouring satellite cities.

But the CSE said long distances between metro stops and residential areas was pushing commuters to switch to private vehicles. "The Metro is convenient but I still had to take an auto-rickshaw or

cial package tours involving the city—a major commercial and tourism hub—would be cancelled.

Six Shanghai hospitals have also suspended outpatient services. "China has accumulated lots of experience in 'dynamic zero-Covid', so our strategy won't change," said Zhang Wenhong, head of the Shanghai Covid prevention expert task force, at a Thursday briefing.

He warned that this could become a "normalised anti-epidemic situation that we may encounter again" in the future. Around 100 kilometres away, Suzhou — which has a population of some 13 million people — closed down tourist attractions and required residents to provide negative test results to leave the city.

Authorities in Beijing are on high alert for any potential outbreaks in the lead up to February's Winter Olympics, which will see an influx of foreign athletes, media and officials. All schools were closed in the small satellite city of Xuzhou, which also stopped its two million residents from heading out of the city on bus services, after a close contact of one Shanghai patient was found there.

A university campus in neighbouring Hangzhou was put under lockdown after a staff member was discovered to be a close contact

force are all deployed to the region.

But identifying friend from foe is a key task—all the militias tend to wear headscarves, wield AK-47s and travel in pick-up trucks. Lieutenant-Colonel Will Meddings, head of Britain's contingent of UN peacekeepers, compares the situation to a jigsaw puzzle.

Even among foreign forces, identification can be a problem. Earlier this month, Estonian troops with the French-led Barkhane anti-jihadist operation accidentally fired on British personnel deployed in the same mission.

'More hats than heads'

An AFP reporter gained a first-hand glimpse of how Meddings' troops have taken a grassroots approach to tackling the identification problem. A British officer who gave his name as Charlie walked over to five men from an authorised armed group, who were sipping tea under the shade of a tree,



BISHKEK: A man sits in a car near a campaign poster of candidates in the upcoming parliamentary election in Bishkek. —AFP

Japarov's critics have said the head of state is repeating the mistakes of his predecessors by arresting potential rivals after overseeing constitutional changes that strengthened his position. Kyrgyzstan hosts a Russian military base and looks to next-door China for loans and investments.

Experts say it is unclear however how much trust the new government enjoys from Russia, whose leader Vladimir Putin described the street protests and sudden overthrow of then-president Sooronbay

Jeenbekov as a "misfortune".

Russian ambassador Nikolai Udovichenko said Thursday that draft legislation promoting use of the state language, Kyrgyz, would lead to "a reduction in the scope of application of the Russian language, enshrined in the Constitution as official, and the narrowing of the rights of Russian-speaking citizens". The deputy chairman of Kyrgyzstan's cabinet, Edil Baisalov, tweeted Friday the legislation was not final and that there was "no need to politicise this issue". —AFP

Delhi's roads worsen India's toxic smog crisis

NEW DELHI: After decades commuting on New Delhi's parlous roads, office worker Ashok Kumar spends more time than ever stuck in the gridlock that packs the Indian capital's thoroughfares and pollutes the city. The sprawling megacity of 20 million people is regularly ranked the world's most polluted capital, with traffic exhaust a main driver of the toxic smog that permeates the skies, especially in winter.

Delhi's patchwork public transport network struggles to cater for a booming population, with long queues snaking outside the city's underground metro stations each evening and overloaded buses inching their way down clogged arterials.

"When I came to Delhi, the air was clean because there were hardly any cars or bikes on the roads," Kumar told AFP while waiting for a ride home outside the city's main bus terminal. "But now everyone owns a vehicle."

Kumar spends nearly four hours each day in a "gruelling journey" to and from his home on Delhi's far southern outskirts, alternating between commuter buses, private shared taxis and rickshaws. Even at the age of 61, Kumar is hoping to save enough money to buy his own scooter and spare

Flights cancelled, schools shut over COVID-19 in Shanghai

SHANGHAI, China: Hundreds of flights were cancelled, some schools shut and tour groups suspended on Friday after three coronavirus cases were reported in Shanghai, as China continues its strict zero-COVID policy.

Beijing has largely succeeded in controlling the spread of the coronavirus within its borders through travel restrictions and snap lockdowns, but frequent domestic flare-ups have tested its no-tolerance strategy in recent months. The three positive cases are friends who travelled to the nearby city of Suzhou together last week, Shanghai health authorities said at a press conference Thursday evening—adding that all had been fully vaccinated.

Over 500 flights from Shanghai's two major airports were cancelled on Friday, data from flight tracker VariFlight showed. The Shanghai government also instructed that all cross-provin-

In Mali's northeast, militias thrive in state's absence

MENAKA, Mali: Security forces in the Menaka region of northeastern Mali are struggling with a kaleidoscope of militia groups as they strive to bring order to the violence-torn area. Almost every important armed group in Mali has a foothold in Menaka, from the so-called Islamic State group to Al-Qaeda affiliates and former Tuareg rebels.

The chaos dates back nine years, when a separatist rebellion in northern Mali spiralled after it was commandeered by jihadists. Malian troops, UN peacekeepers, French soldiers and more recently special forces from the Takuba international task



NEW DELHI: Photo shows people commute along a street amid smoggy conditions in New Delhi. New Delhi, the sprawling megacity of 20 million people is regularly ranked the world's most polluted capital, with traffic exhaust a major driver of the toxic smog that permeates the skies, especially in winter. —AFP

shared taxi from the station to my home," Sudeep Mishra, 31, told AFP.

Mishra's daily commute was a 50-kilometre (30-mile) return journey, including the two kilometres he had to navigate between the nearest station and his home—now all done on a second-hand motorbike.

"It was a hassle and expensive as well," said Mishra, also a white-collar worker. "It made more sense to buy my vehicle to save time and money." Experts say this poor last mile connectivity is a particular issue for women, who often have to choose between private transport or risking a walk on dark and unsafe streets. —AFP



SHANGHAI: Police officers and medical staff members wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) are seen outside a residential area that is under restrictions following a recent coronavirus outbreak in Shanghai. —AFP

of a confirmed case, state media reported. With the leadership determined to host a Covid-free Olympic Games, Beijing's Olympic Park has already been sealed off as part of the event's "closed-loop" bubble, state media reported. —AFP

their assault rifles beside them. He calmly asked them a few questions about who they were. The men, who appeared to pose no threat, replied that they were on watch to "stop jihadists from coming."

The region's officially designated armed groups hold a weekly meeting in the town of Menaka. These groups are former rebels who took up arms in 2012 before signing a peace agreement with the government in 2015. They now operate with official licence.

The region's governor, Mohamed Maiga, said the groups operate independently but use the weekly meeting to exchange information and glean intelligence about the patchwork of territorial control in the sparsely inhabited region.

Within the constellation of militias in Menaka, alliances are brittle, and there is often a hazy line separating jihadists from other armed groups. "There are more hats than heads," said Francisco Osler De Almeida, the local head of the UN's MINUSMA peacekeeping mission. —AFP

Flood damage exposes Kinshasa's unbridled urbanization

KINSHASA: The water transformed a main road into a ravine. It gutted homes, exposing their innards to the world. It left a school playground teetering on the edge of a precipice.

These images come from Kinshasa, capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, where a population influx combined with scant urban planning has exposed many poor people to the impacts of extreme weather.

Millions of people have moved into the city in recent years, although the exact numbers are unknown as no census has been conducted for more than 30 years.

According to some estimates, the city is home to at least 12 million people, a doubling in two decades, out of a national population of some 90 million.

Many have built homes in areas where there has been little planning oversight, especially on hillsides where drains and channels are needed to cope with runoff during the rainy season.

In November 2019, forty Kinshasans died after heavy rains caused flooding and landslides — but two years later, the problems posed by extreme rainfall remain.

Abyss

At the top of a cliff in Kinshasa's southern district of Mont-Ngafula, disused water pipes hang in a void and residents must battle through a gully of shifting sand to reach the neighbouring district.

Floodwater dug out an asphalt avenue, replacing it with an abyss at least 15 metres (50 feet) deep, separating the University of Kinshasa from a Jesuit-run library, one of the biggest in Africa.

Widowed mother-of-seven Esperance Tsimba, 57, saw the earth swallow her shop and livelihood as the rains fell. "I lost my business. Since then, it has been hard to send my children to school", she said. Local residents are building dykes to protect their homes, piling up sandbags in the hope of slowing the landslide and diverting rainwater flows.

They staged a protest to demand action from the authorities, blocking Highway 1, which crosses the town, said resident Magloire Kangondi.

The authorities sent in a Chinese-owned construction vehicle, which has started to smooth out the sand on the road downstream.

But locals are worried that work will stop at a temporary fix, and not address the underlying problem.

"This isn't the first time that they've repaired the road — it's been done several times without success," said Sylvain Nsumbu, headmaster of a primary school whose wall had fallen into the abyss.

Nsumbu said children as young as four had to cross the ravine to attend a kindergarten and that some parents even preferred not to send their offspring to school.

Christel Bulembi, an environment management specialist and community leader in the neighbourhood of Ngansele, said the solution was for the authorities to dig at least one rainwater retention pit to minimise the damage caused by runoff onto the road.

The state "must accept its responsibilities" by having allowed the neighbourhood to urbanise, and would win the local population's support by doing so, Bulembi suggested. —AFP