



'I am not a virus,' insists Indian man named Kovid

After fiery speech on democracy, can Biden deliver on promises?

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ALMATY: This handout image grab taken and released by the Russian Defense Ministry yesterday shows Belarus paratroopers unboarding a military cargo plane after landing in Kazakhstan. —AFP

Kazakhstan detains ex-security chief

Russia hits back at US criticism of its deployment of troops

ALMATY: Kazakhstan said yesterday its former security chief had been arrested for suspected treason during days of unrest, as Russia hit back at US criticism of its deployment of troops to the crisis-hit country. News of the detention of Karim Masimov, a former prime minister and longtime ally of Kazakhstan's ex-leader Nursultan Nazarbayev, comes amid speculation of a power struggle in the ex-Soviet Central Asian nation. The domestic intelligence agency, the National Security Committee (KNB), announced that Masimov had been detained on Thursday on suspicion of high treason. President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev sacked Masimov earlier this week after protests over rising fuel prices erupted into widespread violence, with dozens killed and government buildings in the largest city Almaty stormed and set ablaze.

Tokayev told Russian President Vladimir Putin in a "lengthy" phone call that the situation in the country was stabilizing, the Kremlin said yesterday, and thanked the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) for sending troops to help deal with the unrest. The CSTO has been dispatching several thousand troops to Kazakhstan, including Russian paratroopers, who have been securing strategic sites.

Tokayev says the deployment will be temporary, but US Secretary of State Antony Blinken warned on Friday

that Kazakhstan may have trouble getting them out. "I think one lesson in recent history is that once Russians are in your house, it's sometimes very difficult to get them to leave," Blinken told reporters.

Russia slams 'boorish' US

The Russian foreign ministry slammed his comments as a "boorish" attempt "to make a funny joke today about the tragic events in Kazakhstan". "When Americans are in your house, it can be difficult to stay alive, not being robbed or raped," it alleged. Tensions between Moscow and the West are at post-Cold War highs over fears of a Russian invasion of Ukraine, with talks between Russia and the US to take place in Geneva tomorrow.

Authorities in Kazakhstan said Friday that the situation was largely under control, but Tokayev issued a shoot-to-kill order and rejected any negotiations with protesters. An AFP correspondent in Almaty said the city was quiet but tense yesterday, with security forces firing warning shots at anyone approaching a central square.

Masimov, 56, twice served as Nazarbayev's prime minister and had been head of the KNB since 2016. He was fired at the height of the unrest on Wednesday, when Tokayev also took over from Nazarbayev as head of the powerful security council. Nazarbayev's spokesman Aidos

Ukibay on Saturday denied rumors the ex-president had left the country and said he was urging Kazakhs to "rally around the president".

Denouncing those spreading "knowingly false and speculative information," he said the ex-leader was in the capital Nur-Sultan and in "direct contact" with Tokayev. In a headline address to the nation on Friday, Tokayev said 20,000 "armed bandits" had attacked Almaty and authorized his forces to shoot to kill without warning.

He ridiculed calls from abroad for negotiations as "non-sense", saying: "We are dealing with ... bandits and terrorists. So they must be destroyed." The initial cause of the protests was a spike in fuel prices but a government move to lower the prices and the sacking of the cabinet failed to stop demonstrations continuing.

More than 4,000 detained

The violence erupted when police fired tear gas and stun grenades at thousands protesting in Almaty late on Tuesday. The next day protesters stormed government buildings including the city administration headquarters and presidential residence, setting them ablaze, and a nationwide state of emergency was declared. The interior ministry said 26 "armed criminals" had been killed in the unrest. It said 18 security officers had been killed and more

than 740 wounded. More than 4,000 people have been detained, including some foreigners, the ministry says.

The full picture of the chaos has often been unclear, with widespread disruptions to communications including days-long internet shutdowns. In Almaty, few people were out on the streets yesterday. The military continued to guard the square adjacent to the burnt-out mayor's office, firing warning shots whenever passersby were slow to heed instructions to stay away.

Pensioner Leonid Kiselyev, 68, said his car had been hit by gunfire at around 8:30 am as he drove past, showing a bullet that had pierced the boot. "Yesterday it was calm so I drove here," said a shaken Kiselyev, standing in a long queue at a petrol station. The Zionist entity's foreign ministry said a 22-year-old Zionist citizen who had been living in Kazakhstan for several years was killed by gunfire on Friday night.

Much of the public anger appeared directed at Nazarbayev, who is 81 and had ruled Kazakhstan since 1989 before handing over power. Many protesters shouted "Old Man Out!" in reference to Nazarbayev, and a statue of him was torn down in the southern city of Taldykorgan. Critics have accused him and his family of staying in control behind the scenes and accumulating vast wealth at the expense of ordinary citizens. —AFP

Ethiopian oppn leaders freed under amnesty

NAIROBI: Several high-profile Ethiopian opposition leaders were granted freedom yesterday after the government granted a surprise amnesty for prominent political detainees, including senior Tigrayan figures. The government said the move was designed to promote "national dialogue" and follows a dramatic shift in fortunes in the brutal 14-month war between forces loyal to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and the rebel Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF).

TPLF fighters withdrew to their stronghold in the northernmost region of Tigray at the end of December in the face of a military offensive by government forces that saw them retake a string of strategic towns. Several TPLF figures were among

those pardoned, as well as opposition leaders from the Oromo ethnic group, the largest in Ethiopia, and the Amhara. "The key to lasting unity is dialogue. Ethiopia will make any sacrifices to this end," the government communications service said in a statement late Friday announcing the amnesty.

"Its purpose is to pave the way for a lasting solution to Ethiopia's problems in a peaceful, non-violent way... especially with the aim of making the all-inclusive national dialogue a success." The amnesty was welcomed by the United Nations and the African Union, which has been spearheading international efforts to end the conflict. It was not clear if the government was proposing any negotiations with the TPLF, the party that dominated politics for three decades until Abiy took power in 2018 but is now considered a terrorist group by Addis Ababa.

'National reconciliation'

There has been something of a pause in fighting since the TPLF retreat, although the rebels accuse the government of still carrying out deadly drone strikes on Tigray. The UN reported this week that

three people including two children had been killed in an air raid on a refugee camp in the region.

Tigray also remains under what the United Nations has called a de facto blockade that is preventing life-saving food and medicine from reaching Tigray's six million people, where many are living in famine-like conditions. The war in Africa's second most populous country has claimed the lives of thousands of people, displaced around two million, and inflicted atrocities on civilians in Tigray, as well as the neighboring Amhara and Afar regions.

Abiy - a Nobel peace laureate who reportedly went to the battlefield in November to direct his troops - called for "national reconciliation" and "unity" in a statement issued Friday as Ethiopia celebrated Orthodox Christmas. However, in another statement Saturday he lashed out at "foreign and internal enemies" and described the TPLF as "snakes". The pardons coincided with a mission to Ethiopia by US envoy Jeffrey Feltman, who is pushing for talks to end a conflict that exposed the deep divisions in a country with more than 80 ethnic groups. —AFP

Jailed Palestinian activist lands in Paris after release

PARIS: Egyptian-Palestinian activist Ramy Shaath arrived in France yesterday after almost two and a half years in detention in Egypt, after his family said he had to renounce his Egyptian nationality. The 48-year-old was a figure of the 2011 uprising in Egypt and the coordinator of the Egyptian chapter of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement against the Zionist entity. An AFP correspondent saw the activist walk out of Charles De Gaulle Airport outside Paris with his wife. —AFP

Erdogan courts evasive youth vote ahead of 2023

ANKARA: Yusuf Ziya Guler is one of nearly seven million Turks who grew up with Recep Tayyip Erdogan as their only leader and who can vote for the first time in general elections due by mid-2023. Like his peers, Guler has faded memories of Turkey's economic revival during Erdogan's first decade in power - and a clear impression of the turmoil during his second one. "I am pessimistic about the future," said the 20-year-old medical student, adding he was skeptical of all political parties. "We're an unpredictable country. Forget about what will happen after I graduate, I don't even know what will happen in five months," he told AFP.

Analysts think Gen Z voters - as politically diverse as Turkey itself - hold one of the keys to Erdogan's tricky path to presidential re-election and his ambition to keep his Islamic-rooted party in power for a third decade running. But unlike the youth of 2002, when Erdogan's rise represented a break from systemic corruption and economic stagnation, today's teens appear more tempted to blame his government for their woes.

These include runaway inflation, a battered currency and an economy in which more than 40 percent of the workforce earns the minimum wage. "Today's dire economic situation will only widen the gap between what the (ruling party) can provide and what young people want," said Ayca Alemdaroglu, associate director at Stanford University's Program on Turkey.

Erdogan, 67, and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) appear acutely aware of the importance of winning over young people,

staging rallies and trying to figure out ways to reach teens online. This push has gained added attention as speculation swirls that Erdogan may call an early election in an effort to catch his competitors off guard.

"The key to the next elections is our youth, not this or that party," Erdogan told the opening of a six-day festival for young people in the capital Ankara in Nov 2021. "Just following the president's and other party leaders' speeches... you can see that young people are a serious concern," said Alemdaroglu. The ruling party's efforts to woo this important demographic got off to a shaky start. A brief furor erupted in Sept 2021 over a TikTok account called XYZ Sosyal, which opposition media said was an AKP attempt to endear itself to Gen Z voters with jokes and pro-government clips.

XYZ Sosyal has since vanished but the official AKP youth branch now has a small verified account featuring a video about Erdogan's achievements in office. Alemdaroglu said the AKP has also compiled reports aimed at teaching "party cadres how to use digital technology effectively and speak to young people".

'Great work'

Despite historically low public approval numbers, the AKP retains some appeal among younger voters. Thousands stuck around for the entire November festival after Erdogan's inaugural address. Abdulsamet Semiz, an AKP youth branch chair for the northern Carsamba district, brushed aside suggestions that his party was losing touch with teens. "They're saying the youth are moving away from the AKP but there's no such thing. These are lies. The AKP cares for young people the most," said Semiz, 28.

Some of those attending the festival praised Erdogan for helping lower the age for becoming a member of parliament to 18 from 25, say-



ANKARA: In this photo taken on Nov 16, 2021, people wave Turkish flags during the Local Governments Youth Festival at the Nation's Garden. —AFP

ing this showed his devotion to the young. "Some great work is being done," 19-year-old university student Emrullah Aydin said at the gathering, where the mood was buoyant. Yet gaining the trust of young voters has proved to be elusive - and not just for the AKP. In a survey of 3,000 young people across Turkey's 81 provinces, polling agency Turkiye Raporu found 58 percent would not join any political movement or party as a way of trying to build a better society to live in.

"They don't believe that this current landscape can deliver for them," said Turkiye Raporu director Can Selcuki. "They have very little trust in political parties or in political establishments overall." Fellow pollster Murat Gezici said the generation born between 1980 and 1999 included many undecided voters - especially women - making them possibly more crucial in the next election than the youth demographic. "This group of 18.4 million makes up 32.6 percent of the electorate," Gezici told the Sozcuk daily. —AFP

CONDOLENCES

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Extend our Heartfelt
condolences to
Mr. Ashok Kumar & Family
(Senior Marketing Manager)

on the sad demise
of his Mother
who passed away in India

May her soul Rest in Peace