

International

Russia-led troops begin pullback from Kazakhstan

Almaty returns to normal after unprecedented violence

ALMATY: Over 2,000 Russia-led troops began withdrawing from Kazakhstan yesterday after being deployed when peaceful protests over an energy price hike in the Central Asian country turned into unprecedented violence claiming dozens of lives.

The decision to dispatch peacekeepers was a first for the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), often touted by Russia as a NATO equivalent. At a ceremony marking the end of the mission, soldiers lined up as anthems from each of the six CSTO member countries were played before official speeches.

"The peacekeeping operation is over ... the tasks have been fulfilled," said Russian General Andrei Serdyukov, commander of the CSTO contingent that included troops from Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The Russian defense ministry said its forces were loading equipment into military planes as part of the contingent's drawdown.

Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev had hailed the "psychological importance" of the mission during his first visit to the country's main city Almaty since the crisis began. The financial hub of 1.8 million people was devastated during clashes between security forces and government opponents that gave way to a spree of looting.

Claims of foreign meddling

It has gradually returned to normal, with public transport back on the roads and most restaurants and shops open. One strategic complex the CSTO contingent was guarding was Almaty airport, which was reportedly seized by government opponents last week.

The airport's press service said that it was handling both domestic and international flights again yesterday. AFP correspondents in Almaty earlier yesterday witnessed a funeral for a serviceman killed during the clashes, which was attended by dozens of soldiers and fea-



ALMATY, Kazakhstan: Collective Security Treaty Organization's (CSTO) Belarus' soldiers attend a ceremony marking the end of the CSTO mission in Almaty yesterday. — AFP

tered somber military music. Tokayev has framed the clashes as a coup attempt assisted by local and international terrorists and said that economic damage from the violence "could total \$2-3 billion."

At least 12,000 people have been detained, police said, with at least three journalists reportedly under arrest. Russian President Vladimir Putin hinted that the violence was reminiscent of "color revolutions" instigated with foreign help. Those official narratives—despite lacking in proof—resonated with some residents of Almaty.

road and into a tree. The vehicle then flipped over onto a pile of rocks. Balingasag municipal police chief Major Teodoro De Oro said.

Eleven people were killed, including a three-year-old child, De Oro said, adding police were seeking to confirm another three deaths. Scores of other passengers were injured, including a dozen children. The driver, who was also hurt and tried to hide after receiving medical treatment, was arrested and will face charges. The vehicle was part of a convoy of three trucks but the other two were not involved in the accident, De Oro said.

Deadly road mishaps are common in the Philippines, where drivers frequently flout the rules and vehicles are often poorly maintained or overloaded. In 2019, 19 farmers were killed in the mountainous northern Philippines when a truck carrying them and sacks of rice seeds plunged backwards down a deep ravine. —AFP

11 killed in Philippine truck crash

MANILA: At least 11 people were killed after a small truck packed with partygoers, including children, overturned in the southern Philippines, police said yesterday. The vehicle was travelling to a beachside resort on Mindanao island for a postponed Christmas party on Wednesday when the driver lost control after the brakes apparently failed on a downhill section of road.

Around 50 people were crammed into the truck, most of them in the open tray, when it veered off the



BALINGASAG, Philippines: This undated handout photo received from the Balingasag police station yesterday shows residents looking at the wreckage of a truck that overturned killing at least 11 people onboard. — AFP

US lays out case against 'unlawful' China maritime claims

WASHINGTON: The United States on Wednesday laid out its most detailed case yet against Beijing's "unlawful" claims in the South China Sea, rejecting both the geographic and historic bases for its vast, divisive map. In a 47-page research paper, the State Department's Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs said China had no basis under international law for claims that have put Beijing on a collision course with the Philippines, Vietnam and other Southeast Asian nations.

"The overall effect of these maritime claims is that the PRC unlawfully claims sovereignty or some form of exclusive jurisdiction over most of the South China Sea," the paper said, referring to the People's Republic of China. "These claims gravely undermine the rule of law in the oceans and numerous universally recognized provisions of international law reflected in the Convention," it said, referring to a 1982 UN treaty on the law of the sea ratified by China—but not the United States.

Releasing the study, a State Department statement called again on Beijing "to cease its unlawful and coercive activities in the South China Sea."

China hit back yesterday, claiming the report "distorts international law and misleads the public." "The US refuses to sign the treaty but portrays itself as a judge and wantonly distorts the treaty," said foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin at a briefing.

"In seeking its own selfish interests it uses multiple standards to carry out political manipulation."

The paper is an update of a 2014 study that similarly disputed the so-called "nine-dash line" that forms the basis for much of Beijing's stance. In 2016, an international court sided with the Philippines in its complaints over China's claims. Beijing replied by offering new justifications, including saying that China had "historic rights" over the area.

The State Department paper said that such historical-based claims had "no legal basis" and that China had not offered specifics. It also took issue with geographic justifications for China's claims, saying that more than 100 features Beijing highlights in the South China Sea are submerged by water during high tide and therefore are "beyond the lawful limits of any state's territorial sea." Beijing cites such geographic features to claim four "island groups," which the State Department study said did not meet criteria for baselines under the UN convention.

The report was issued as the United States increasingly challenges China on the global stage, identifying the rising communist power as its chief long-term threat. The South China Sea is home to valuable oil and gas deposits and shipping lanes, and Beijing's neighbors have frequently voiced concern that their giant neighbor was seeking to expand its reach. —AFP

'Provoked by West'

Retired engineer Malik Shaimukhambetov blamed the shootouts in his city on "foreign aggression," which he said had subverted state troops and allowed gangs to seize government buildings.

"I see these events as a kind of Orange Revolution provoked by the West," Shaimukhambetov said, referring to political protests that erupted in Ukraine in 2004. Tokayev, who spoke with Putin yesterday and again thanked him for dispatching troops, said earlier the pull-out would take no more than 10 days.

News in brief

Six charged over Russian prison rape

MOSCOW: Russian investigators said yesterday that six people, including two officials, had been charged over the rape and torture of prisoners in an explosive case that drew wide condemnation. A prisoner advocacy group last year published harrowing footage of sexual abuse at a jail in the central city of Saratov. It was leaked by former inmate Sergei Savelyev, who fled Russia and requested asylum in France. In an interview published yesterday, the head of the Investigative Committee, which handles serious crimes, said six people were prosecuted. —AFP

Lithuanians sue Gorbachev

VILNIUS, Lithuania: Six Lithuanians who lost relatives during Moscow's crackdown on the Baltic state's independence drive filed a lawsuit against former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev yesterday. The group initiated legal action 31 years to the day since the January 1991 assault, which killed 14 civilians and wounded over 700. In 2019, a Lithuanian court convicted dozens of Soviet-era officials of war crimes but the country's prosecutors have refused to investigate Gorbachev, who was in power at the time. The refusal has angered those seeking justice for the crackdown. —AFP

Pirate attacks at 27-year low in 2021

KULA LUMPUR: Pirate attacks on ships fell to their lowest level in nearly three decades last year, driven by a steep decrease off West Africa, a maritime watchdog said yesterday. A total of 132 incidents of piracy and armed robbery were reported worldwide, the lowest recorded figure since 1994, the International Maritime Bureau (IMB) said in its annual report. There was a marked fall in the Gulf of Guinea off West Africa, with just 34 reported incidents in 2021 compared with 81 the previous year, the watchdog said. —AFP

Russian strikes in Syria kill 11

BEIRUT: Russian air strikes in desert areas of eastern Syria have killed 11 suspected members of the Islamic State group, a war monitor reported yesterday. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which monitors casualties of the decade-old conflict, said the overnight strikes focused on an area between Palmyra and Al-Sukhna. "The jihadist organization's members hide in caves in this area," Observatory chief Rami Abdel Rahman said. The strikes killed 11 IS fighters and wounded around 20 others, some of them seriously, he said. —AFP

Zionist fire kills own commandos

JERUSALEM: Two Zionist state's commandos were killed by friendly fire in the occupied West Bank overnight, the army said yesterday. The two officers were on patrol around their base in the Jordan Valley when they were "misidentified and mistakenly killed" by Zionist army fire, the military said on Twitter. "Immense sorrow this morning with the announcement of the death of two officers of Unit Egoz," said Defense Minister Benny Gantz, adding that an in-depth investigation was already under way. —AFP

There had been concerns that Moscow would leverage the mission to shore up influence in Kazakhstan and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken earlier warned that "once Russians are in your house, it's sometimes very difficult to get them to leave". Last week's violence erupted on the back of rallies over a rise in fuel prices and against a background of deteriorating living standards and endemic corruption. But it has also highlighted infighting at the very top of the hydrocarbon-rich country's elite.

Tokayev this week launched an attack on his long-ruling mentor and predecessor Nazarbayev, 81, who was focal point for protests and was widely viewed as Kazakhstan's main decider prior to the crisis.

Yesterday the national security committee announced that former committee head Karim Masimov and two of his deputies had been arrested and were under investigation for "actions aimed at the forcible seizure of power, and abuse of office". The status of another former deputy head of the committee, Nazarbayev nephew Samat Abish, is so far unclear, despite the presidential press service announcing another official in his place last week. Masimov was a key ally of Nazarbayev and seen as perpetuating the octogenarian's political influence after he stepped down from the presidency in 2019. Neither Nazarbayev or his immediate family have made public appearances since the crisis began, although his press secretary has claimed he was in the capital. His oldest daughter Dariga Nazarbayeva has been absent from parliament where she serves as a lawmaker.

The 58-year-old is at her home in Almaty recovering from the coronavirus, media reported Thursday, citing her assistant. Nazarbayev's youngest daughter Aliya Nazarbayeva, 41, thanked Kazakh citizens for the "moral support" she claimed they had shown her father during the crisis. —AFP

Superspreader fears at mass holy dip in India

KOLKATA: Hundreds of thousands of Indian pilgrims began packing an island in the Ganges yesterday for a vast religious festival as COVID-19 cases surge nationwide, prompting fears of a superspreader event.

Officials said they expected as many as three million people, including ash-smeared, dreadlocked ascetics, to take a ritual dip in the holy river today, the climax of the annual Gangasagar Mela.

Last April's Kumbh Mela, a similarly colossal religious festival that the government refused to ban, was partly blamed for a devastating spike in cases that killed 200,000, according to official tallies, though some experts fear the actual toll was several times that. With coronavirus case numbers once again ballooning, a Kolkata court last week ruled that the Gangasagar Mela, which takes place on Sagar Island at the mouth of the Ganges in West Bengal, could go ahead.

The state government yesterday appealed to people to get tested for COVID-19, with West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee urging devotees to wear two masks and not "spit on the island, as it spreads the virus". As with 2021's Kumbh Mela, this week's festival is attracting people from across northern India who, after cramming onto trains, buses and boats to reach the island, will then go home—potentially taking the virus's highly transmissible Omicron variant with them.

"It's a big challenge amid the raging surge of the COVID variant to maintain social distancing," local district magistrate P Ulganathan told AFP. "There is no doubt that such a gathering where people are in close proximity will increase the spread. We are continuously appealing to people to follow COVID-appropriate behavior." Amitava Nandy, a virologist from the School of Tropical Medicines in Kolkata, said the government "has neither the facilities nor the manpower" to test everyone attending or impose social-distancing norms. "A stampede-like situation could happen if the police try to enforce social distancing on the river bank," Nandy told AFP, saying the festival "may end up being the superspreader of the virus in India".

Devotee Sarbananda Mishra, 56, who came from the neighboring state of Bihar, told AFP that "faith in God will overcome the fear of COVID. The bathing will cleanse them of all their sins and bring salvation." "Death is the ultimate truth. What is the point of living with fear?" said Mishra, a schoolteacher resting at one of the many camps in nearby Kolkata waiting to go to the festival. —AFP



KOLKATA: Pilgrims perform rituals as they pray at the beach during the religious festival of Gangasagar Mela on Sagar Island, some 150 kilometers south of Kolkata, West Bengal, yesterday. — AFP