

ANKARA (Reuters) -- Turkish police used pepper gas to disperse pro-Kurdish protesters in Ankara and Istanbul on Sunday, detaining at least 12 people in Istanbul, Reuters witnesses said. The protesters were demonstrating against the Turkish military's operation against a U.S.-backed Kurdish militants in Syria's northern Afrin province. Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan had earlier warned supporters of the pro-Kurdish opposition not to protest the military's operation, saying security forces would intervene if they demonstrated.

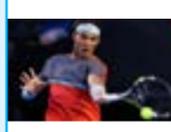
ADDIS ABABA (AP) -- Ethiopia's leader has rejected arbitration by the World Bank on a disagreement with Egypt over the hydroelectric dam that Ethiopia is building on the Nile River. Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn on Saturday refused the suggestion made by Egypt in late December that the World Bank should be brought in to resolve the dispute with Ethiopia over the construction of the dam on the Nile River that Egypt says threatens its water security. Sudan is also part of the negotiations because the Nile flows through it on the way to Egypt.

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Trump Asks Senate to Change Rules: 800,000 Workers Stay Home Amid U.S. Shutdown

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - U.S. President Donald Trump said on Sunday that if the government shutdown stalemate continued, Republicans should fund the government by changing Senate rules, which currently require a super-majority for appropriations bills to pass.

"The Dems (Democrats) just want illegal immigrants to pour into our nation unchecked. If stalemate continues, Republicans should go to 51% (Nuclear Option) and vote on real, long term budget," Trump said on Twitter.

Trump's proposal was almost immediately rejected by Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell.

Senate Republicans oppose changing the chamber's rules so that legislation to fund the government and end the current shutdown could pass with a simple majority, the spokesman said.

"The Republican Conference opposes changing the rules on legislation," the spokesman said in an email.

Current Senate rules require a super-majority of three-fifths of the chamber, usually 60 out of 100, for legislation to clear procedural hurdles and pass.

Funding for federal agencies ran out Saturday with Trump and Republican lawmakers locked in a standoff with Democrats. There appeared to be no clear path for a quick end to the crisis.

Democrats say short-term

spending legislation must include protections for illegal immigrants brought to the United States as children, known as "Dreamers." Republicans, who have a slim 51-49 Senate majority, said they would not negotiate on immigration until the government was reopened.

With elections set in November for a third of U.S. Senate seats and the entire House of Representatives, both sides are maneuvering for the shutdown.

This is the first shutdown in U.S. history with one party in control of the House, Senate, and the presidency.

Democrats and Republicans are still deliberating over reaching a deal to end the shutdown. It's unclear how close the two sides are to a compromise, but little progress seems to have been made.

Trump's first anniversary in office has been marked by the turbulence and division that have defined his presidency, with the government shutdown and protests in cities across the country.

Up to 800,000 federal workers were told to stay home after the White House and Congress failed to strike a compromise on the government spending bill. Workers deemed essential and armed forces personnel were asked to stay at work. If the shutdown continues, they will likely go unpaid.

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Is Turkey Helping Terrorists With Syria Operation?



A Turkish military convoy arrives at a village on the Turkish-Syrian border in Kilis province.

ISTANBUL (Dispatches) -- Turkish ground forces pushed into northern Syria's Afrin province on Sunday, Ankara said after launching artillery and airstrikes on U.S.-backed Kurdish militants it aims to sweep from its border.

The YPG militants, supported by the United States but seen as a terrorist organization by Turkey, said it had repulsed the Turkish forces and their allies after fierce clashes.

One Syrian refugee was killed and 32 people were wounded on Sunday in rocket fire on a Turkish town close to the Syrian border, a local official said.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan had declared on Sunday that his forces would crush the

YPG militants.

Speaking to a congress of his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the northwestern city of Bursa, Erdogan also accused some of Turkey's allies of providing 2,000 plane shipments and 5,000 truckloads of weapons to the YPG.

Erdogan's comments came after Turkey's prime minister, Binali Yildirim, confirmed on Sunday that Turkish troops were continuing their offensive inside Syria.

"The operation will be conducted at speed. This operation will also target any support provided to the terrorists in Afrin," said Yildirim.

Yildirim told media representatives in Istanbul that there were 8,000 to 10,000 militants in Afrin and that Turkey was resolute in its determination to

cleanse all militant presence from the area.

He also said the operation planned to create a safe zone that would extend 30km into Syria's Afrin region.

The fighting marks the second day of Turkey's new front in the nearly seven-year-old Syria war.

Under what the Turkish government has dubbed as "Operation Olive Branch," Turkish airstrikes on Saturday pounded YPG positions in Afrin province.

The military said it had hit 153 targets so far, including shelters and hideouts used by Kurdish militants. The YPG has said Turkey's strikes killed six civilians and three of its fighters and wounded 13 civilians.

The YPG accused Turkey of striking civilian districts and a camp for the displaced in Afrin.

On land, the Turkey-backed Free Syrian Army militants were also helping the operation in Afrin, Turkish officials said.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad condemned the operation, stating that the offensive is part of Ankara's support for Takfiri terrorist groups operating inside the Arab country.

"The brutal Turkish aggression on the Syrian town of Afrin cannot be separated from the Turkish regime's policy from the first day of Syria's crisis, which was essentially built on supporting terrorism and terrorist organizations, whatever their names," Assad said in statements carried by Syria's official news agency SANA.

Iran also called for a quick end to the Turkish incursion into Afrin province, saying it may help "terrorist" groups, state news agency IRNA reported.

"Iran hopes that this operation will be ended immediately to prevent a deepening of the crisis in the border regions of Turkey and Syria," it quoted Foreign Ministry spokesman Bahram Qasemi as saying. "A continued crisis in Afrin may boost ...terrorist groups in northern Syria."

France strongly urged Turkey to end its offensive in Syria and called for a UN Security Council meeting to be held on the "humanitarian risks" of the new military intervention in the war-torn country.

"This fighting ... must stop" French Defense Minister Florence Parly said.

Turkey's intense bombardment continued on the region's Balia and Topal villages, the YPG said.

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Rohingya Muslims Being Sent Back to Killing Fields

GUNGDUM, Bangladesh (Dispatches) -- Tensions mounted on Sunday at refugee camps in Bangladesh holding hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims over an operation to send them back to Myanmar, from where they have fled following a military crackdown.

Dozens of refugees stood holding cloth banners opposing their transfer as United Nations Special Rapporteur Yanghee Lee visited camps along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border over the weekend. Some refugee leaders said Bangladesh military officials had threatened to seize their food ration cards if they did not return.

Under an agreement signed last week, Myanmar is set to receive Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh at two reception centers and a temporary camp near their common border starting on Tuesday and continuing over the next two years.

The refugees refuse to go back

unless their safety can be guaranteed and Myanmar grant their demands to be given citizenship and inclusion in a list of recognized ethnic minorities. They are also asking that their homes, mosques and schools that were burned down or damaged in the military operation be rebuilt.

Over 700,000 Muslim Rohingya fled to Bangladesh after the Myanmar military cracked down in the northern part of Rakhine state in response to militant attacks on security forces on Aug. 25. The United Nations described the operation as ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya.

Rohingya elders told Reuters that Bangladeshi army officials have called or met them over the last two days, asking them to prepare lists of families from their camps for repatriation. Four of them said they were among more than 70 camp leaders - representing thousands of refugees - who met army officers at the Gungdum camp on

Saturday.

"When we said we cannot provide the lists because people are not ready to return, they asked us to bring their WP cards," said Musa, a leader at the Gungdum camp, referring to relief cards provided by the UN's World Food Program.

Rashedul Hasan, a spokesman for the Bangladesh army, said he was not aware of army men threatening to take away food cards.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has repeatedly said Rohingya returns need to be voluntary.

"UNHCR has not been part of discussions (on repatriation) to date, but has offered support to engage in the process to ensure that the voices of refugees are heard," Caroline Gluck, a senior protection officer for the agency, said by email on Saturday.

"The pace of returns should be determined by the refugees themselves."

Taliban Kill 14 Foreigners in Brazen Attack on Kabul Hotel

KABUL (Reuters) -- A Taliban assault on the Intercontinental Hotel in Afghanistan's capital killed at least 18 people, including 14 foreigners, and pinned security forces down for more than 13 hours before the last attacker was slain Sunday. The casualty toll expected to rise.

The heavily guarded luxury hotel is popular among foreigners and Afghan officials. Interior Ministry spokesman Najib Danish said the 18 killed included 14 foreigners and a telecommunications official from western Farah province who was attending a conference.

Danish said 11 of the 14 foreigners killed were employees of KamAir, a private Afghan airline. KamAir also put out a

statement saying some of their flights were disrupted because of the attack.

One Ukrainian citizen was killed in the attack, according to Vasyl Kyrlych, a spokesman for the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry. His brief statement on Twitter did not provide further details. Afghan officials did not identify the foreigner killed in the attack.

Ten other people, including six from the security forces, were reported wounded and more than 150 people, including 41 foreigners, were rescued from the hotel, Danish said.

The Taliban claimed the attack, which began around 9 p.m. Saturday, saying five gunmen armed with suicide vests targeted

foreigners and Afghan officials. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said the insurgents initially planned to attack the hotel Thursday night but postponed the assault because there was a wedding underway and they wanted to avoid civilian casualties.

The attack unfolded almost six years after Taliban insurgents launched a similar assault on the property, which is not part of the Intercontinental chain of worldwide hotels.

The Interior Ministry said a private firm assumed responsibility for securing the hotel around three weeks ago. The ministry says it is investigating how the attackers managed to enter the building.

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