

Maze of Steel Wire Cripples Life in Kashmir's Main City



Indian security personnel stand guard on a street in Srinagar.

SRINAGAR, India (AP) — The main city in the India-administered part of the disputed Himalayan region of Kashmir has turned into a vast maze of razor wire coils and steel barricades as drones and helicopters hover overhead.

Wearing flak jackets and riot gear, paramilitary soldiers carry automatic rifles and shotguns to control the network of checkpoints and barricades across roads, lanes and intersections in Srinagar. The few vehicles and pedestrians allowed through are regulated through this maze.

Although the 4 million residents of the Kashmir Valley, where an insurgency has simmered for decades, are used to blockades, the one imposed after the Indian government's surprise move last week to strip the region of constitutional privileges is something residents say they've never seen before. Amid the labyrinth whose entry and exit points are changed frequently, people find themselves disoriented in their own city, and struggle

to memorize its frequently changing street map.

"This is so vast, so expansive," resident Zameer Ahmed said as he prepared to enter one barbed passage-way. "The entire Srinagar city has been knitted in razor wire to seek our silence and obedience."

The lockdown in the Muslim-majority valley, the restive heart of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, has been in place since last week, when New Delhi scrapped the disputed Himalayan region's special constitutional status, taking away the final vestige of the political autonomy and privileged rights to land ownership and public sector jobs it was granted when the region joined the newly formed republic of India after independence from the British in 1947.

Since then, India and Pakistan have fought two wars over rival claims to Kashmir, with each left controlling a part of the region.

The Indian side has seen several uprisings, including a bloody armed

rebellion launched in 1989 to demand independence or a merger with Pakistan. About 70,000 people have been killed in that uprising and the subsequent Indian military crackdown that left Kashmiris exhausted, traumatized and broken.

Even before India's Parliament voted Aug. 5 to strip Jammu and Kashmir's statehood and split it into two union territories, the central government imposed a curfew, suspended telephone and internet services and deployed tens of thousands of additional soldiers to the region — already one of the world's most militarized zones.

Razor wire divides neighborhoods, discouraging people from assembling. Some roads are blocked by perpendicularly parked armored vehicles or private buses. Because of the complexity of the security forces' one-way system, it is impossible to use the same route and return home from any particular destination, even if it is within sight.

"They've changed the road map of our city, trying to make us like strangers in our own neighborhoods," said Bashir Ahmed, a resident of downtown Srinagar.

"This is a drill about disciplining and regulating people's movement. This is to psychologically break people and teach them that they're not in control of their own bodies," said Saiba Varma of the University of California, San Diego, who is in Srinagar for post-doctoral research in medical anthropology.

"In Palestine, the (Israeli) blockade has restricted food and medicine. But here it's different. They're letting people eat but trying to control Kashmiri bodies, minds and spirits," Varma said.

Hong Kong Plunges Into 'Brink of No Return'



Protesters shine a laser beam during a confrontation with police.

HONG KONG (Dispatches) — Protesters severely crippled operations at Hong Kong's international airport for a second day Tuesday, forcing authorities to cancel all remaining flights out of the city after demonstrators took over the terminals as part of ongoing riots.

On Monday, more than 200 flights were canceled and the airport was effectively shut down with no flights taking off or landing.

Passengers have been forced to seek accommodation in the city while airlines struggle to find other ways to get them to their destinations.

China this week condemned some protesters for using dangerous tools to attack police, calling the clashes "sprouts of terrorism."

Paramilitary police were assembling across the border in the city of Shenzhen for exercises.

Police have arrested more than 700 rioters since early June and say they have infiltrated the ranks of the demonstrators.

The United Nations' top human rights official condemned violence surrounding the riots and called on the authorities and protesters to settle their dispute peacefully.

Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam said the instability, chaos and violence have placed the city on a "path of no return."

Some rioters have thrown bricks, eggs and flaming objects at police stations. Police say several officers have suffered burns, bruises and eye damage inflicted by protesters.

Lam told reporters Tuesday that dialogue would only begin when the violence stopped. She reiterated her support for the police and said they have had to make on-the-spot decisions under difficult circumstances, using "the lowest level of force."

"After the violence has been stopped, and the chaotic situation that we are seeing could subside," Lam said. "I as the chief executive will be responsible to rebuild Hong Kong's economy... to help Hong Kong to move on."

After two months, the protests have become increasingly divisive and prompted clashes across the city.

The airport shutdown added to what authorities say is already a major blow to the financial hub's crucial tourism industry.

Kerry Dickinson, a traveler from South Africa, said she had trouble getting her luggage Tuesday morning. "I don't think I will ever fly to Hong Kong again," she said.

Hong Kong's Cathay Pacific Airways told employees in a memo that the carrier has a "zero tolerance" for employees joining "illegal protests" and warned violators could be fired.

Climate Protesters Attack Brazil Embassy in London



Police officers detain an activist during Extinction Rebellion climate change protest in front of Brazilian Embassy in London, August 13, 2019.

LONDON (Reuters) -- Climate-change protesters threw red paint at the Brazilian embassy in London on Tuesday to demonstrate against damage to the Amazon rainforest and what they described as violence against indigenous tribes living there.

Police arrested six activists from the Extinction Rebellion group after they glued themselves to the embassy windows and climbed onto a glass awning above the entrance.

The protesters had splattered red paint and sprayed red handprints over the facade, along with slogans such as "No More Indigenous Blood" and "For The Wild".

Extinction Rebellion, which disrupted traffic in central London for several weeks earlier this year, said Tuesday's protest aimed to challenge the Brazilian government over "state-sanctioned human rights abuses and ecocide."

Brazil contains about 60 percent of the Amazon rainforest, a bulwark against global warming thanks to the vast amounts of carbon dioxide it soaks up and recycles into oxygen.

Far-right President Jair Bolsonaro, who took office in January, has long been skeptical about environmental concerns. He argues that the Amazon is a resource that belongs to Brazil and should be economically developed. He also criticizes the existence of protected lands.

resulting in a dramatic acceleration of deforestation and in violence against the rainforest's indigenous inhabitants.

Last week, data from Brazil's own space research agency showed that deforestation on Brazilian territory had jumped around 67 percent in the first seven months of the year. Bolsonaro has rejected the agency's data and fired its chief.

A tribal leader was found dead last month near Brazil's border with French Guiana. Tribe members alleged he was murdered and it was linked to an invasion of their lands by wildcat miners. Bolsonaro said there was no evidence of that.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet described the death as "a disturbing symptom of the growing problem of encroachment on indigenous land - especially forests - by miners, loggers and farmers in Brazil".

Extinction Rebellion said the protest in London was timed to coincide with a march by indigenous women in Brasilia on Tuesday, and that similar actions were taking place at Brazilian embassies in Chile, Portugal, France, Switzerland and Spain.

The Brazilian embassy in London said in response to Extinction Rebellion's actions that it welcomed anyone wishing to establish a dialogue about Brazil's public policies, but the right to vandalize property did not exist in any country.

U.S. Black Families Underserved, Overcharged: Study



The racial wealth gap in the U.S. has expanded over the last two decades, according to federal data.

WASHINGTON (Reuters) -- Many African Americans have difficulty accumulating savings in part because they lack access to mainstream financial services like banking, a new study on the contributing factors to the U.S. racial wealth gap by McKinsey & Co found on Tuesday.

Many minorities in the United States depend on more expensive financial services like check-cashing counters since there are fewer banks in non-white neighborhoods. Increasing access to basic banking services, like checking and savings accounts, could save individual black Americans up to \$40,000 over their lifetime, the

report found. "Black families are being underserved and overcharged by institutions that can provide the best channels for saving," said the report authored by McKinsey partners Shelley Stewart and Jason Wright.

In majority-white counties, there are an average of 41 financial institutions for every 100,000 people compared with 27 in non-white majority neighborhoods. However, more expensive services like pay-day lending are more readily available in black neighborhoods, the report said.

Further, banks in black neighborhoods typically require higher account

balances to avoid service fees. The average minimum balance in white neighborhoods was \$626, compared with \$871 in black neighborhoods.

The racial wealth gap, or the difference between the average white and black households' net worth, has expanded over the last two decades, according to federal data. As of 2016, the wealth of the average white family was 10 times higher than the average wealth of a black family. The white household had a net worth of \$171,000 while average black and Hispanic households had a median net worth of \$17,600 and \$20,700 respectively.

McKinsey says closing the gap between black and white wealth in the United States could increase GDP by up to 6% by 2028 through increased investments and consumption.

The gap became a talking point in the campaign trail after presidential candidate Senator Elizabeth Warren published a plan to close the gap by giving \$7 billion to minority entrepreneurs and expanding the Community Reinvestment Act (CRA).

Regulators including the Federal Reserve and the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency are considering overhauling the CRA, a law passed as a follow-on to civil rights era laws meant to prevent racial discrimination in lending, and to end practices like "redlining" in which banks effectively refused to lend in certain neighborhoods.

Knife-Wielding Man Kills One in Central Sydney

SYDNEY (AFP) -- A knife-wielding man killed one person and attempted to stab several others in a central Sydney rampage Tuesday before being chased and pinned down by members of the public, witnesses told AFP.

Police said a 21-year-old Sydney man with a history of mental illness is believed to have killed a woman of around the same age in a residential unit before going on the rampage across the city centre.

New South Wales police commissioner Mick Fuller said the man had no known links to terror organizations, but did have a thumb drive with details of mass-casualty white-supremacist attacks in the United States and New Zealand.

Witness Megan Hales told AFP she saw a man brandishing a large kitchen knife chasing several people through the busy central business district shortly after lunchtime.

A 41-year-old woman who was stabbed is now said to be in a stable condition.

"Five or six others were chasing him behind, trying to stop him, they caught him and restrained him" in front of two popular cafes in the heart of the city, Hales said.

Four of the pursuers were Colombian-born Alex Roberts, and Britons Lee Cuthbert and brothers Paul and Luke O'Shaughnessy -- all colleagues at a recruitment consultancy who raced from their fourth-floor office to the street.

"We've opened the window and seen the guy wielding a knife and jumping on the bonnet" of a nearby car, Paul O'Shaughnessy, a former professional footballer, told AFP.

Convinced it was a terrorist attack, his brother Luke -- a champion Muay Thai boxer -- led the chase. "We all just ran down the building and chased him down the street," said Roberts.



LONDON (Reuters) -- A majority of Britons believe Prime Minister Boris Johnson must take Britain out of the European Union "by any means", even if that involves suspending parliament, an opinion poll conducted for the Daily Telegraph said on Monday. Johnson has promised to lead Britain out of the EU on Oct. 31 regardless of whether he manages to secure an exit deal with Brussels, despite many in parliament being opposed to leaving without a deal. A ComRes opinion poll showed 54% of respondents said they agreed with the statement: "Boris (Johnson) needs to deliver Brexit by any means, including suspending parliament if necessary, in order to prevent MPs (Members of Parliament) from stopping it." Johnson is seeking a deal with the EU but has not ruled out suspending parliament to prevent lawmakers' attempts to block a no-deal exit.

MOSCOW (Dispatches) -- The Kremlin on Tuesday said President Vladimir Putin does not see a series of recent protests in Moscow as anything significant. The Russian capital has been gripped by three consecutive weekends of opposition protests, with police arresting and detaining more than 1,000 people. Giving the Kremlin's first official comments on the protests in Moscow, spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Tuesday that Putin has not spoken out about the demonstrations because he does not think there is anything "exceptional" about them. "Protests happen in many countries," he said, adding that there are more important events in Russia for the president to care about. Peskov rejected suggestions that the protests have plunged the Kremlin into a political crisis and defended police response at the three weekends of protests. "We believe that a disproportionate use of force by law enforcement officers is absolutely unacceptable but we think that the police response in clamping down on rioting was totally justified," Peskov told reporters.

KIEV (Reuters) -- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed a decree on Tuesday offering citizenship to Russians suffering political persecution, and also to foreigners who fought on Kiev's side in the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Zelenskyy had announced such a move last month in response to a Russian decree expanding the number of Ukrainians who can apply for fast-track Russian passports. Separately, Ukraine's state security service declared a Russian consular officer in the western city of Lviv as persona non grata, accusing him of spying. The officer had already left the country, a statement said. Relations between Kiev and Moscow plunged after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its support for fighters in the eastern Donbass region in a conflict that has killed 13,000 people despite a notional cease-fire. Zelenskyy has prioritized achieving peace in the Donbass region, but days after his election victory in April Russian President Vladimir Putin eased rules for residents of rebel-controlled parts of Donbass to receive passports. In July he extended the offer to government-held areas.

BRUSSELS (AP) -- The United Nations refugee agency urgently appealed to European governments Tuesday to let two migrant rescue ships disembark more than 500 passengers who remain stranded at sea as countries bicker over who should take responsibility for them. The people rescued while attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea from North Africa are on ships chartered by humanitarian aid groups, which the Italian government has banned from its territory. The archipelago nation of Malta has refused to let the ships into the country's ports. It's unclear where they might find safe harbor, even though the Italian island of Lampedusa appears closest. About 150 of the rescued passengers have been on the Spanish-flagged charity ship, the Open Arms, since they were plucked from the Mediterranean 13 days ago.

BISHKEK (Reuters) -- The head of Kyrgyzstan's security forces on Tuesday accused ex-president Almazbek Atambayev on Tuesday of plotting to stage a coup, state news agency Kabar said, following a deadly clash last week with police sent to his house to arrest him. Atambayev surrendered on Thursday when police raided his home and detained him for questioning over a corruption case, laying bare a power struggle with his successor Sooronbai Jeenbekov that has pushed the Central Asian nation to the brink of political crisis. Atambayev's supporters had repulsed a similar raid the previous day in which a deputy commander of a special forces unit was killed. In an indictment related to the botched raid, prosecutors on Tuesday charged him with murder, hostage-taking and causing mass unrest, Kabar said. Atambayev has dismissed criminal investigations against him as politically motivated and illegal.

KUALA LUMPUR (AFP) -- A naked body believed to be that of a Franco-Irish teen who disappeared from a Malaysian resort was found in a jungle ravine Tuesday after a 10-day search involving a massive team. A helicopter winched the body out of the rainforest and transported it to hospital, where the parents of missing 15-year-old Nora Quoirin were headed to identify it. She disappeared from the Dusun Resort, not far from Kuala Lumpur, on August 4, a day after checking in for a holiday with her London-based family. Her family believed she had been abducted but police originally classified it as a missing person case. The body was found in a small stream in a ravine about 2.5 kilometers (1.5 miles) from the resort, Malaysia's deputy national police chief Mazlan Mansor told a press conference.