

Stripped of Autonomy, Kashmiris Blast 'Brutal Siege'



Indian security forces personnel patrol a street in Srinagar January 10, 2020.

SRINAGAR, India (AP) — Authorities enforced security restrictions in many parts of Indian-controlled Kashmir on Wednesday, a year after New Delhi revoked the disputed region's semi-autonomy in a decision that set off anger and economic ruin amid a harsh security clampdown.

Officials lifted a curfew in the restive region's main city of Srinagar late Tuesday, but said restrictions on public movement, transport and commercial activities would continue because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Government forces placed steel barricades and razor wire across many roads, bridges and intersections. Shops and businesses remained shut and police and soldiers stopped residents at checkpoints, only letting an occasional vehicle or pedestrian pass.

Several residents said government forces stopped them at checkpoints, saying the curfew was still in place.

"You call it a curfew or virus lockdown, the fact is that we're under a brutal siege and this siege is a year old now," said Ishfaq Ahmed, a Srinagar resident.

On Aug. 5, 2019, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist government stripped Jammu and Kashmir's statehood, scrapped its separate constitution and removed inherited protections on land and jobs.

The region was also split into two federal territories — Ladakh and Jammu-Kashmir. Following the move, Indian authorities enforced an information blackout and a security clampdown in Kashmir for months. Thousands of Kashmiri youths and pro-independence leaders, as well as pro-India Kashmiri

politicians, were arrested. Hundreds are still incarcerated.

As some of the restrictions were eased, India enforced another harsh lockdown to combat the spread of the coronavirus, deepening the economic crisis in the region.

In Ladakh's Muslim-majority Kargil district, where people have resented India's move, religious and political groups demanded revocation of the order, calling Aug. 5 a "black day." Businesses and shops remained closed in most of the district.

Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan demanded Wednesday that the international community "force India to reverse its present course against the Kashmiri people."

"Pakistan will always be with its brothers and sisters" in Indian-controlled Kashmir, Khan said in a statement.

On Tuesday, Khan unveiled a new map of Pakistan that includes Indian-held Kashmir and Junagadh, part of the western Indian state of Gujrat, within the Muslim-majority country's boundaries for the first time in 70 years. India rejected the move as "an exercise in political absurdity."

Authorities barred some pro-India Kashmiri leaders who have opposed the decision from meeting in Srinagar.

"BJP displaying its hypocrisy. They can gather & celebrate," tweeted Omar Abdullah, the region's former top elected official who was released after about eight months in detention. "The rest of us can't even meet to discuss what's happening" in the region, he said.

Envoy: China Not After Tensions With U.S., India



U.S. President Donald Trump poses for a photo with China's President Xi Jinping before their bilateral meeting during the G20 leaders summit in Osaka, Japan, June 29, 2019.

WASHINGTON (Reuters) — Beijing does not want tensions with Washington to escalate further following tit-for-tat consulate closures over the past weeks, the Chinese ambassador to the United States said.

The world's top two economies should work to cooperate instead of confronting each other, Ambassador Cui Tiankai said, striking a relatively conciliatory tone at the virtual Aspen Security forum.

"I don't think a new Cold War would serve anybody's interest," said Cui, seen as a moderate voice among Beijing's top diplomatic brass. "Why should we allow

history to repeat ... when we are faced with so many new challenges?" he said, while rejecting U.S. allegations of Chinese spying in the Houston consulate shut down by Washington last month.

U.S.-China ties have quickly deteriorated this year over a range of issues including Beijing's handling of the coronavirus; telecoms-equipment maker Huawei; China's territorial claims in the South China Sea; and the clampdown on Hong Kong.

Cui pushed back on Washington's allegations that Beijing was employing intimidation tactics across the South China Sea and said inten-

sifying U.S. military activities in the region were raising the risk of a potential confrontation.

Asked about TikTok, the Chinese-owned short-video app that President Donald Trump threatened to ban as of Sept. 15 barring a sale to another company outside of China, Cui said there was no evidence that the company was sharing information with the Chinese government.

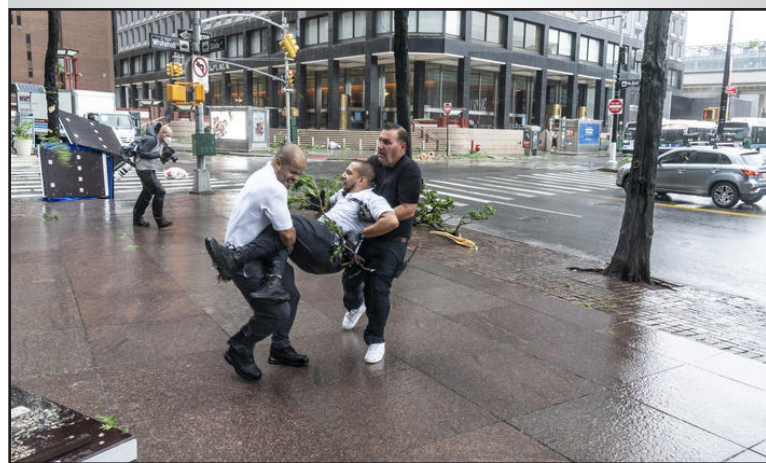
Cui's comments came a little more than a week after a July 23 policy speech in California by U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who described getting Beijing to change its ways as "the mission of our time."

Despite the tensions, Cui said Washington and Beijing were moving along on the Phase One trade deal. "The two economic teams have been in contact with each other at various levels... and we are making progress," he said.

The ambassador also said a border dispute between India and China - which turned deadly in June when troops of the two sides clashed - should not dominate relations between the nuclear-armed Asian powers.

"I don't think this issue should dominate in relations between China and India, and I don't think this is the view of our Indian friends," Cui said in an appearance at the Aspen Security Forum.

At Least Six Killed as Isaias Pummels Eastern U.S.



Co-workers carry injured maintenance worker by downed by strong wind tree after tropical storm Isaias lashes out New York City.

WINDSOR, N.C. (AP) — At least six people were killed as Tropical Storm Isaias spawned tornadoes and dumped rain Tuesday along the U.S. East Coast after making landfall as a hurricane in North Carolina, where it caused floods and fires that displaced dozens of people.

Two people died when Isaias spun off a tornado that struck a North Carolina mobile home park. Another person died in Pennsylvania when their vehicle was overtaken by water and swept downstream. Two others were killed by falling trees toppled by the storm in Maryland and New York City, and a sixth person died in Delaware when a tree branch fell on them, authorities said.

Isaias sustained top winds of up to 65 mph (105 kph) more than 18 hours after coming ashore, but it was down to 45 mph max winds as of 10:50 p.m. EDT Tuesday, according to the National Hurricane Center. The storm's center was about 45 miles southeast of Montreal, moving northeast into Canada at about 38 mph (61 kph).

As Isaias sped northward, flooding threats followed. The Schuylkill River in Philadelphia was projected to crest early Wednesday at 15.4 feet (4.7 meters), its highest level in more than 150 years. By Tuesday night, the river had already topped its banks in low-lying Manayunk, turning bar-lined Main

Street into a coffee-colored canal.

Aerial video by WRAL-TV showed fields of debris where rescue workers in brightly colored shirts picked through splintered boards and other wreckage of the Windsor, North Carolina, mobile home park where two people were killed. Emergency responders searching the area Tuesday afternoon found no other casualties, and several people initially feared missing had all been accounted for, said Ron Wesson, chairman of the Bertie County Board of Commissioners. He said about 12 people were hospitalized.

In eastern Pennsylvania, a 44-year-old Allentown woman was killed after encountering high waters on a street in Upper Saucon Township that swept her vehicle downstream Tuesday afternoon, the Lehigh County coroner's office said.

While in New York City, a massive tree fell and crushed a van in the Briarwood section of Queens, killing Mario Siles, a 60-year-old construction contractor who was inside the vehicle, police said. A woman in Mechanicsville, Maryland, died when a tree crashed onto her car during stormy conditions, said Cpl. Julie Yingling of the St. Mary's County sheriff's office.

In Delaware, authorities said a woman was outside assessing storm damage when she was hit and killed by a falling tree branch.

Is Lukashenko Burning 'Brotherly Bridges' With Russia?



Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko and his son Nikolai attend the Victory Day Parade in Red Square in Moscow, June 24, 2020.

MINSK (AFP) -- Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko seems set on burning once "brotherly" bridges with the Kremlin during a volatile election campaign that has seen him arrest Russian citizens and raid a bank with links to Moscow.

The strongman leader of ex-Soviet Belarus has accused "puppeteers" and "Telegram channels" with ties to Moscow of meddling in the August 9 elections in which he is expected to secure a sixth term.

His security services stormed Belgazprombank -- a subsidiary of Russian energy giant Gazprom -- which was once headed by a now jailed opposition candidate, and Gazprom criticised the installation of new management.

The 65-year-old authoritarian leader has also called for military exercises near the Russian border.

But the biggest upset came last week when his KGB security services arrested 33 Russians, calling them mercenaries who were dispatched over the frontier to stir unrest.

Belarus is more tightly linked to Russia than any other country and the two form a "union state" with an integrated economic zone, military alliance, and potential for even deeper unification.

But the partnership has come under strain in recent years, and Lukashenko's recent

moves could act as a final blow that ruptures the special relationship.

During a televised address to the nation this week, Lukashenko said Belarus was important to Russia because Moscow "does not have any other close allies left".

He has raised the prospect of a "point of no return, when relations between the two countries turn from brotherly and strategic into ordinary and practical," said Arseniy Sivitski, director of the Center of Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies in Minsk.

In Russia, official comments on the elections have been reserved, with Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov describing the vote as a domestic issue in Belarus.

But the outspoken leader of the nationalist LDP party Vladimir Zhirinovskiy accused Lukashenko of being addicted to power after ruling over Belarus for 26 years.

"Power... is the scariest drug, Lukashenko can't get enough," Zhirinovskiy said, calling on the Belarusian president to withdraw from the race so the polls could be "beautiful".

Foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said the vagaries of campaign politics alone could not threaten the "strong foundations" of Russia's ties with Belarus. But she added a veiled threat:

"Regarding the detained Russian citizens... we will not let any harm come to them, and they know this very well in Minsk," she wrote on Facebook.



WASHINGTON (AP) — In an abrupt reversal, President Donald Trump is encouraging voters in the critical swing state of Florida to vote by mail after months of criticizing the practice — and while his campaign and the GOP challenge Nevada over its new vote-by-mail law. Democratic requests to vote by mail have surged in Florida, a state that Trump almost certainly must win to secure a second term. Democrats currently have about 1.9 million Floridians signed up to vote by mail this November, almost 600,000 more than the Republicans' 1.3 million, according to the Florida secretary of state. In 2016, both sides had about 1.3 million signed up before the general election. "Whether you call it Vote by Mail or Absentee Voting, in Florida the election system is Safe and Secure, Tried and True," Trump tweeted Tuesday. "Florida's Voting system has been cleaned up (we defeated Democrats attempts at change), so in Florida I encourage all to request a Ballot & Vote by Mail!"

BEIJING (AFP) — China said Wednesday a visit by a top U.S. cabinet member to Taiwan was endangering peace and stability in the region, with relations between the two powers at historic lows. Washington's de facto embassy in Taipei said U.S. health secretary Alex Azar would lead a delegation to the self-ruled island, which Beijing claims as part of China and has vowed to one day seize. "China firmly opposes official exchanges between the US and Taiwan," Wang Wenbin, a spokesman of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said at a regular briefing. "We urge the U.S. to abide by the one-China principle... to avoid seriously endangering Sino-U.S. relations, as well as peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait."

NEW YORK (Reuters) — Two thirds of registered American voters oppose delaying the Nov. 3 presidential election due to the coronavirus pandemic, and more than half think President Donald Trump floated the idea of postponing it last week to help himself politically, according to Reuters/Ipsos polling released on Wednesday. The national public opinion poll was conducted from July 31 to Aug. 4, shortly after Trump said without providing evidence that a surge in mail-in voting would lead to widespread voter fraud and suggested the election be delayed. The idea was immediately rejected by Democrats and Republicans in Congress, who have sole authority to change the election date. Most Americans also rejected the suggestion. The poll showed 66% of registered voters oppose postponing the November vote, including 8 out of 10 Democrats and 5 in 10 Republicans.

LONDONDERRY, Northern Ireland (Reuters) — Northern Ireland peacemaker John Hume was remembered for his unshakeable commitment to non-violence at a small funeral on Wednesday where the pope, former U.S. President Bill Clinton and fellow Nobel Laureate, the Dalai Lama, sent messages of support. Hume, the Roman Catholic architect of the 1998 Good Friday peace agreement that ended 30 years of sectarian violence, was credited with dragging a British region convulsed by bloodshed to the negotiating table. He died on Monday aged 83. Respecting COVID-19 restrictions, fewer than 100 mourners in masks, including Irish Prime Minister Micheal Martin and the Catholic and Protestant leaders of Northern Ireland were dotted around the large St Eugene's Cathedral in Hume's native Derry.

MOSCOW (AP) — Firefighters in Russia are battling to contain bush fires stretching across 60,000 hectares of land, which have been exacerbated by a recent heatwave in the country. The fires are currently raging in the Chukotka autonomous area, the Yakaterinburg region and the Amur region. "Ecology", a national project to restore lost green spaces throughout the country, is also threatened by the rising temperatures. Almost 2.5 billion rubles (€29 million) have been allocated from the federal budget to the scheme. This money is being used to sow seeds in the regions, to build nurseries and modern greenhouses for growing seedlings. The Omsk region has also been affected by the heatwave this summer.

GENEVA/SEOUL (Reuters) — North Korea's test results for a man suspected of being the country's first coronavirus case were inconclusive, though authorities have quarantined over 3,635 primary and secondary contacts, a World Health Organization official told Reuters. On July 26 North Korea said it had declared a state of emergency and locked down the border city of Kaesong after a person who defected to South Korea three years ago returned across the fortified border with what state media said were symptoms of COVID-19. At the time, state media was unclear over whether the man had been tested, saying "uncertain result was made from several medical check-ups". But leader Kim Jong Un declared that "the vicious virus could be said to have entered the country." If confirmed, the case would have been the first officially acknowledged by North Korean authorities, but since then, state media have continued to say no cases have been reported. "The person was tested for COVID-19, but test results were inconclusive," Dr. Edwin Salvador, WHO representative for North Korea, said in comments emailed to Reuters on Wednesday.

Global Death Toll From Coronavirus Tops 700,000

BRASILIA (Reuters) -- The global death toll from the coronavirus surpassed 700,000 on Wednesday, according to a Reuters tally, with the United States, Brazil, India and Mexico leading the rise in fatalities.

Nearly 19,900 people are dying every 24 hours from COVID-19 on average, according to Reuters calculations based on data from the past two weeks.

That equates to 247 people per hour, or one person every 15 seconds.

President Donald Trump said the coronavirus outbreak is as under control as it can get in the United States, where more than 155,000 people have died amid a patchy response to the public health crisis that has failed to stem a rise in cases.

"They are dying, that's true," Trump said in an interview with the Axios news website. "It is what it is. But that doesn't mean we aren't doing everything we can. It's under control as much as you can control it. This is a horrible plague."

In Brazil, President Jair Bolsonaro has minimized the

gravity of the pandemic and opposed lockdown measures, even as he and several of his cabinet tested positive for the virus.

The pandemic was initially slower to reach Latin America, which is home to about 640 million people, than much of the world. But officials have since struggled to control its spread because of the region's poverty and densely packed cities.

More than 100 million people across Latin America and the Caribbean live in slums, according to the United Nations Human Settlements Programme. Many have jobs in the informal sector with little in the way of a social safety net and have continued to work throughout the pandemic.

Even in parts of the world that had appeared to have curbed the spread of the virus, countries have recently seen single-day records in new cases, signaling the battle is far from over.

Australia, Japan, Hong Kong, Bolivia, Sudan, Ethiopia, Bulgaria, Belgium, Uzbekistan and Israel all recently had record increases in cases.