

International

Suicide bomber hits Afghan army base, kills 30 security personnel

One of the bloodiest attacks in recent months

GHAZNI: A suicide car bomber struck an army base in Afghanistan yesterday killing at least 30 security personnel, officials said, in one of the bloodiest attacks targeting government forces in recent months. The attack occurred on the outskirts of Ghazni city, capital of the eastern province of Ghazni, which has seen regular fighting between the Taliban and government forces.

It came as the Afghan government and Taliban are engaged in peace talks, but a top official said such attacks have the potential to "harm the peace process" as violence continues to surge across the country. "Thirty bodies and 24 wounded people have been brought to hospital. All of them are security personnel," Baz Mohammad Hemat, director of Ghazni hospital said. Interior ministry spokesman Tariq Arian said a suicide bomber had detonated a vehicle full of explosives. "The bomber drove a Humvee vehicle right inside the base and detonated it," Ghazni governor spokesman Wahidullah Jumazada said.

The base is located on a vast swath of arid land surrounded by mountains. Video footages showed military ambulances taking the dead and wounded to hospitals and cranes deployed to remove the debris from the site of the attack in the base. The ministry of defense gave a toll of 10 security personnel killed and seven wounded. The ministry is known to downplay tolls in attacks against its forces. No group has so far claimed the attack, and the Taliban who are fighting government forces

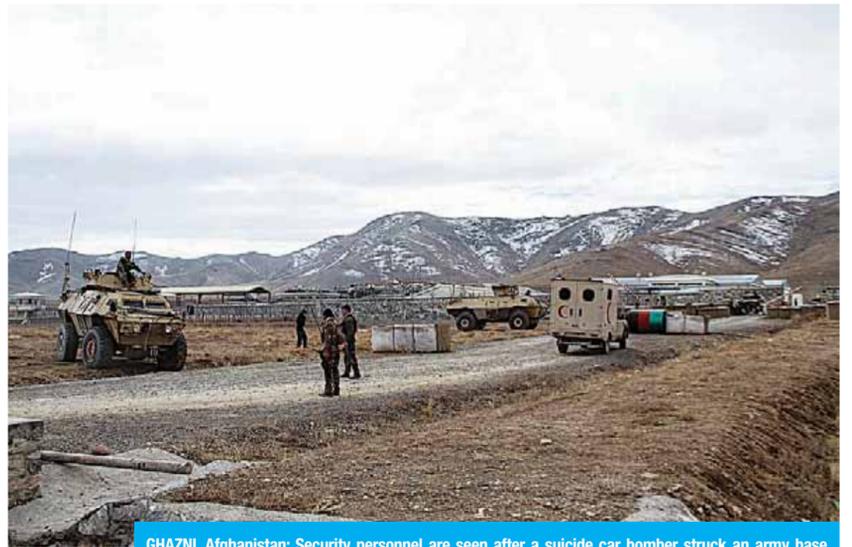
largely in rural areas have often not commented on deadly strikes since the peace talks commenced in September.

'Atmosphere of fear'

"Such terrorist attacks will create an atmosphere of fear, terror and pessimism among the Afghan people and will harm the peace process," said Abdullah Abdullah, who is leading the overall peace process in Afghanistan. "The increase in violence is not acceptable to people... and runs against the peace process, negotiations and reconciliation."

The Ghazni attack comes just days after two bombs killed 14 people in the historic city of Bamiyan, ending years of calm in the isolated town famous for its ancient Buddhist heritage. In another suicide car bomb attack yesterday, one civilian was killed and 20 others wounded in the southern city of Qalat in the province of Zabul, provincial police chief Hekmatullah Kochi told AFP. Yesterday's bombings marked the latest carnage in Afghanistan, where violence has surged since the start of peace talks on September 12 in Doha.

Brutal attacks have killed more than 50 people in Kabul in recent weeks, including two assaults on educational centers and a rocket attack. The three Kabul attacks were claimed by the Islamic State group, but Afghan officials blamed the Taliban - who denied any involvement. Peace talks had been bogged down by disputes on the agenda, the basic framework of discussions and



GHAZNI, Afghanistan: Security personnel are seen after a suicide car bomber struck an army base yesterday. —AFP

religious interpretations, but agreement has now been reached on all issues, according to sources close to the talks.

Late on Saturday, a spokesman for the government negotiating team, Nader Nadery, said on Twitter that there had been progress in talks but an overall agreement was still to be finalized. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo

called for "expedited discussions" during a visit to Doha last week where he met negotiators from both sides. The Pentagon said earlier this month that it would soon pull out some 2,000 troops from Afghanistan, speeding up the timeline of a full withdrawal by May 2021 as agreed with the Taliban in a separate deal signed in February. —AFP

Protesters target Thai royal guards unit in latest rally

BANGKOK: Hundreds of protesters marched on a barracks of Thailand's royal guards unit yesterday hoisting inflatable rubber ducks high above their heads, a whimsical show of force by a pro-democracy movement calling for curbs to the power of the monarchy. The yellow toy has been harnessed as a symbol by the protesters, whose leaders have emphasized peaceful tactics despite recent use of water cannon and tear gas by security forces.

But their demands to reform the kingdom's unassailable monarchy—once a taboo topic due to a draconian royal defamation law—have sent shockwaves through Thailand's political and ruling class. Yesterday's protest—the latest in a series of near-daily turnouts across Bangkok—was meant to target the 11th Infantry Regiment. Along with the 1st Infantry Regiment, the two units were placed under King Maha Vajiralongkorn's direct control last year—a move experts saw as a way for the monarch to assert more authority.

"These two regiments have been involved in cracking down on people in the past," said prominent protest leader Parit "Penguin" Chiwarak. "They have also played key roles in past coups." The black-clad protesters wore hair clips with yellow rubber ducks, while those on the frontlines donned gas masks and helmets—prepared for any potential skirmishes with authorities. The entrances, gates and walls of the barracks were covered with coils of barbed wire, while police in riot gear stood guard outside.

"The things used against us are bought using our taxes, so they are using our money to hurt us," Farnq, a 30-year-old graduate student, told AFP, declining to provide her full name. "As taxpayers, the army should be serving us, not the monarchy," she said. "Their duty should be to protect the people." The military has long positioned itself as a defender of Thailand's enormously wealthy royal family, who boast assets conservatively estimated to be some \$30-\$60 billion. In the name of protecting the king, the army has staged more than a dozen coups since the end of absolute monarchy in 1932. The most recent was in 2014.

Coup mastermind General Prayut Chan-O-Cha was head of a junta regime before renewing his lease on power in elections last year, which were governed under a military-scripted constitution.



BANGKOK: A line of pro-democracy protesters wearing helmets link hands as they walk in front of others carrying large inflatable ducks during a march to the 11th Infantry Regiment yesterday. —AFP

Besides royal reform, the protesters are also demanding Prayut's removal as premier and a rewrite of the constitution. So far scores of protesters have been charged with sedition, while at least a dozen prominent leaders were summoned for questioning on royal defamation allegations. Army Chief Narongphan Jittkaewtae has rejected coup rumors, saying the chance of another putsch was "less than zero". —AFP

Armenians rally for soldiers missing in Karabakh fighting

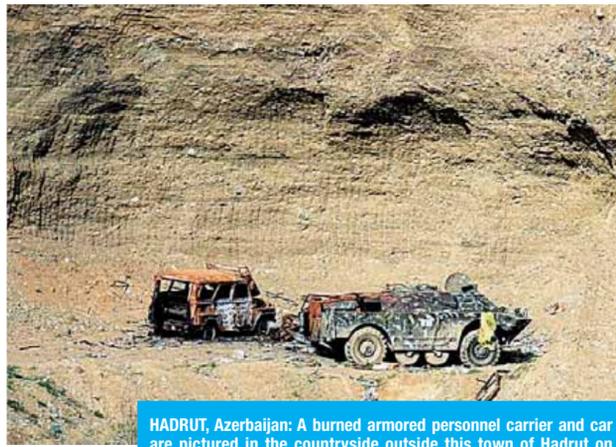
YEREVAN: A thousand people took to the streets of the Armenian capital Yerevan yesterday demanding the authorities take action to find soldiers missing in recent fighting with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. The protesters, including several local celebrities, marched through Yerevan holding up photos of the missing soldiers and posters that read "Help return our captives". At the start of the march, the demonstrators read out a letter addressed to the Russian ambassador in Yerevan asking him to "personally intervene in the process" and pass on their request to Moscow.

The six weeks of fighting over the restive region were halted by a Russia-brokered peace deal that was signed by the ex-Soviet rivals on November 9. Under the document, Azerbaijan reclaimed swathes of territories that for three decades were held by Armenian separatists. The accord also provided for the exchange of prisoners and bodies. AFP journalists

reported that a smaller gathering of 30 people took place on Saturday in Karabakh's main city Stepanakert.

Demonstrators briefly blocked a main street in the city until their representatives were received by Arayik Harutyunyan, the president of the self-proclaimed republic. "We are calling for immediate action to resolve the problem. But the authorities say that it is not up to them, that it depends on the Azerbaijanis," 47-year-old Arsen Ghukasyan said after the meeting. Ghukasyan says he is searching for his son and brother who was last in touch in early October, less than a week after fresh clashes broke out over Nagorno-Karabakh, an ethnic Armenian enclave that declared independence from Baku during a war in the 1990s.

Another man, who is looking for his son, said the missing soldiers are "waiting for the Armenians to come and rescue them". "But we, parents, are without hope. We do not know



HADRUT, Azerbaijan: A burned armored personnel carrier and car are pictured in the countryside outside this town of Hadrut on Saturday. —AFP

how to save our children," the 47-year-old father added. Karabakh rights ombudsman Artak Beglaryan said on Friday that around 50-60 Armenian soldiers were being held as prisoners in Azerbaijan. Armenian authorities have reported more than

2,300 military casualties while Baku has not disclosed army losses. The International Committee of the Red Cross has overseen the exchange of casualties under the protection of Russian peacekeepers who have been deployed to the region. —AFP

South Korea bans year-end parties, music lessons

SEOUL: South Korean authorities announced a ban on year-end parties and some music lessons yesterday and said public saunas and some cafes must also close after coronavirus infections surged at their fastest pace since the early days of the pandemic. South Korea has been one of the world's coronavirus mitigation success stories but spikes in infections have reappeared relentlessly, triggering alarm in Asia's fourth-largest economy.

Authorities reported 450 new infections yesterday after more than 500 cases were recorded for three days in a row, the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency said. What authorities are calling a third wave of infections is spreading at the fastest rate in nearly nine months, driven by outbreaks at military facilities, a sauna, a high school and churches.

Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun said restrictions would be tightened on gatherings and activities seen as prone to virus transmission, especially in the capital Seoul and surrounding urban areas. "Year-end events and parties hosted by hotels, party rooms, guest houses and other accommodation facilities will be banned outright," Chung told a briefing after meeting health officials.

Saunas and steam-bath rooms with a high risk of mass infection would also be banned as would the teaching of wind musical instruments and singing, he

said. For the rest of the country, social distancing rules would also be tightened from tomorrow, he said. Chung said the government was talking to parliament about the possibility of new relief funds for households and businesses, the third this year as the economy struggles.

"Our assessment is that we need the third crisis support fund ... The government will come up with a conclusion on this after discussing with both the ruling and opposition parties," he said. President Moon Jae-in toured a Seoul high school on Sunday that was being prepared as a test center to accommodate students in quarantine on Dec 3, when almost 500,000 students sit for the annual college entrance exam. Moon toured classrooms where desks were equipped with partitions and hand sanitizers to host five test takers in quarantine. —Reuters

Indian farmers defiant as Modi tries to calm anger

NEW DELHI: Thousands of Indian farmers, angry over reform of the agriculture sector, held a third day of protests on the outskirts of the capital yesterday, blocking roads into the city and defying a government appeal to move to a designated site. The government on Saturday invited farmers' union leaders for talks on new legislation to deregulate agricultural but that has not calmed farmers' anger over what many see "anti-farm laws", and their action appeared to be spreading.

"We will stay put here today," said Rakesh Tikait, spokesman of the Bharatiya Kisan Union, one of more than 30 protesting unions, as he and his members blocked a road on the eastern approaches to Delhi. The farmers object to legislation introduced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government in September that would let farmers sell their produce anywhere, including to big corporate buyers like Walmart, not just at government-regulated wholesale markets where growers are assured of a minimum price.

Small growers worry they will be left vulnerable to big business and could eventually lose price support for staples such as wheat and rice. Modi sought to allay farmers' concerns yesterday. "From these reforms, farmers will get new rights and opportunities," he said in his monthly radio address. But one farm union leader said many protesters were demanding that the government withdraw the laws. "The farmers' leaders will meet later on to decide their response to the government," he said, referring to the government's call for talks.

The protests began with farmers from the northern states of Haryana and Punjab on the outskirts of New Delhi on Friday, when police fired tear gas and water cannon in a bid to disperse them. But instead farmers from the neighboring state of Uttar Pradesh joined in over the weekend, blocking roads to the east of the capital. Media reported protests by farmers in the southern states of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Kerala on Saturday. Prices of fresh produce prices at wholesale markets in the city began to tick up and commuters have faced travel disruption. —Reuters

Arrested Salvador gang members paraded for cameras

SAN SALVADOR: Hundreds of handcuffed Salvadoran gang members were displayed before assembled reporters on Saturday, a vivid show of President Nayib Bukele's policy of confronting them and the violent crime they are accused of committing. Some 600 members of El Salvador's Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) gang and its rival Barrio 18 made up the bulk of the detentions that were announced on Friday, following a one-week US-backed round-up of Central American gangs that also netted arrests in neighboring Guatemala and Honduras.

The detainees paraded before the press on Saturday, a common tactic that predates Bukele, have been charged with murder, kidnapping and human trafficking, among other crimes, according to officials. In April, Bukele provoked the ire of rights groups when he published on social media jarring pictures of hundreds of semi-naked jailed gang members, pressed tightly together in rows, despite the raging pandemic. —Reuters