

Tunisia will re-impose a night curfew and ban all gatherings for two weeks to counter the spread of COVID-19, in a move critics decried as aimed at stopping a planned protest for Friday, Reuters reported.

Peace, stability return to Kazakhstan: Ambassador

EXCLUSIVE

International Desk

The Kazakh ambassador in Iran said that peace and stability have returned to his country, adding that over 9,000 people were detained by police during protests that descended into violence last week.

Speaking at a press conference on recent developments in Kazakhstan on Wednesday, Askhat Orazbay noted that in Almaty, Kazakhstan's largest city, protesters stormed and briefly seized the airport and some important offices.

The demonstrations began on January 2 over a near-doubling of prices for a type of vehicle fuel and quickly spread across the country, apparently reflecting wider discontent with the government.

Orazbay said following talks with protesters, the government announced a 180-day price cap on vehicle fuel and a moratorium on utility rate increases.

The authorities of Kazakhstan declared a state of emergency over the unrest, and President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev requested help from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a military alliance of six former Soviet states.

The group which sent about 2,030 troops to Kazakhstan as peacekeepers will leave the country by January 23, as normal life has returned to Kazakhstan.

Tokayev on Monday described the events of last week as a "terrorist aggression" against the country and dismissed reports of the authorities fighting peaceful demonstrators as "disinformation."



Kazakhstan's Ambassador to Tehran Askhat Orazbay

IRAN DAILY

The Kazakh ambassador noted that evidence indicates that there were trained terrorists among protesters which caused lots of destruction.

"The main purpose of these terrorists was to carry out armed operations to overthrow the constitutional-based gov-

ernment of Kazakhstan," Orazbay added.

The Kazakh diplomat said that weapons were used just to counter armed terrorists and that protesters who were protesting peacefully had never been shot.

Tokayev on Tuesday delivered an address at a special session of the Mazhilis

(lower chamber of Kazakhstan's parliament) and elaborated on plans to address damages following the terror attacks at the earliest.

Orazbay said the Kazakh people expect the proposed plans to be completed in a short time, adding that the goal of the new program is to support lower-income groups.

The ambassador said that according to new decisions, Kazakhstan will take every measure possible to restore confidence in domestic and foreign investors and trade partners in Kazakhstan's economy.

"Within two months, the government and the Chamber of Entrepreneurs will develop a plan to increase the income of the general public and will prepare concrete proposals to reduce poverty in Kazakhstan," Orazbay said.

"A systemic effort will be made to reduce inflation and ensure the stability of the national currency of Kazakhstan," the diplomat noted.

The imbalance in the economic development of various regions of Kazakhstan will be addressed by the government, he said, adding that the government has been instructed to prepare a set of measures to level up the regions that are lagging behind economically.

The ambassador said that in order to strengthen national security and efficiently counter all types of threats, the entire national security system will be reorganized, including the armed forces, law enforcement agencies, national security agencies, and intelligence service.

Kremlin: No ultimatums, but Russia needs concrete answers on security from West



OLIVIER HOSLET/POOL VIA REUTERS

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg (L) chats with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko ahead of NATO-Russia Council at the Alliance's headquarters in Brussels, Belgium, on January 12, 2022.

Russia is not making ultimatums in its negotiations with the West but needs concrete answers regarding its security concerns, the Kremlin said on Wednesday as talks took place with NATO in Brussels.

"We are not negotiating from a position of strength, there is not and nor can there be any place for ultimatums here," Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov told reporters, according to Reuters.

"The situation has simply reached such a critical point in terms of pan-European security and the national interests of our country...that we cannot delay further and the concerns we have voiced need concrete answers."

Russia's meetings with the West are part of an effort to defuse the worst East-West tensions since the Cold War, triggered primarily by a confrontation over Ukraine, which the United States claims Russia may be planning to invade. Moscow dismisses such allegations.

Peskov said Russia was ready

to negotiate directly with Ukraine provided existing agreements were fulfilled. He said live-fire exercises with troops and tanks that Russian forces held near the Ukrainian border on Tuesday were not linked to the NATO talks.

NATO allies say that many of Russia's demands, laid out in two draft treaties in December, are unacceptable, including calls to scale back the alliance's activities to 1990s levels and promise not to take in new members.

Asked about possible Finnish membership of NATO, Peskov said NATO was an "instrument of confrontation" and any enlargement of it was a concern to Russia.

Russia's military build-up near Ukraine has rekindled debate in Finland about whether it should join NATO, and the Nordic country has said it reserves the option of seeking membership at any time. Neutral Sweden has also strengthened ties with the alliance.

Saudi reports highest daily new COVID-19 infections so far

Saudi Arabia registered its highest daily number of new COVID-19 infections so far, Health Ministry data showed, breaking through 5,000 cases on Wednesday.

Cases in the kingdom, which has the largest population among the Persian Gulf Arab States – around 35 million – have risen dramatically since the start of the year with the global spread of the Omicron variant, according to Reuters.

The kingdom on Wednesday reported 5,362 new cases and two deaths, rising above the previous peak of daily infections in June 2020 of 4,919.

Mask wearing in public in Saudi Arabia has been compulsory since the start of the year.

Other Persian Gulf Arab states have also seen infections surge in the past month, with Kuwait and Qatar also breaking through previous daily case records.

Meanwhile, Germany reported more than 80,000 new coronavirus infections, the high-

est recorded in a single day since the pandemic began, as daily coronavirus infections in Bulgaria reached a record high of 7,062.

The European Medicines Agency says the spread of the Omicron coronavirus variant across the continent is pushing COVID-19 towards being an endemic disease that humanity can live with.

The number of new coronavirus infections in the last week jumped by about 55%, although the number of deaths remained stable, the World Health Organization said in its latest pandemic report, according to AP.

In the weekly report issued Tuesday night, the UN health agency said there were about 15 million new COVID-19 cases last week and more than 43,000 deaths. Every world region reported a rise in COVID-19 cases except for Africa, where officials saw an 11% drop.

Last week, WHO noted a pandemic record high of 9.5 million new infections in a single week, calling it a "tsunami" of disease.



FAYEZ NURELDINE/AFP
Saudi staff check people's mobiles for vaccine certificates or a negative COVID-19 test in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Car bomb in Somali capital kills at least eight people

A car bomb exploded on a road leading to the airport in the Somali capital Mogadishu on Wednesday, killing at least eight people, the head of the city's ambulance services said.

Mogadishu resident Mohamed Osman said the shock of the blast hit the walls and roof of a mosque he was praying in nearby, according to Reuters.

"When I came out of the mosque, I saw several old houses collapsed, body parts on the street, hands, legs," Osman told Reuters.

"Destroyed cars, burnt Tuk tuks (rickshaws); all this mess and loss of lives in a minute, I survived."

The attack was claimed by the Al-Shabab terrorist group, which said in a brief statement that it was targeting "foreign officers".

Osman said he had seen nine bodies at the scene. Abdikadir Abd-Dirahman, director of Aamin Ambulance service, put the death toll at eight.

"A car bomb targeted a convoy, including bullet proof cars using Avisone street, we do not who owns the convoy. We carried eight dead people from the scene," Abd-Dirahman told Reuters.

The attack took place only days after Somali leaders had agreed on a new timetable for long-delayed elections in the troubled Horn of Africa country, AFP reported.

The government said in a statement on Twitter that it condemned the "cowardly" suicide attack.

"Such acts of terrorism will not derail the peace & the ongoing development in the country. We must unite in the fight against terrorism."



FEISAL OMAR/REUTERS

A general view shows the scene of an explosion in the Hamarweyne district of Mogadishu, Somalia, on January 12, 2022.

Witnesses said a multi-vehicle private security convoy escorting foreigners was passing by the area in southern Mogadishu when the explosion hit.

Somalia has been in the grip of a political crisis since February last year after it failed to reach agreement on holding new elections.

The impasse set off a bitter power struggle between President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, better known as Farmajo, and his Prime Minister Mohamed Hussein Roble.

Under a deal announced late Sunday after talks between Roble and state leaders, parliamentary polls that should have wrapped up last year are now due to be concluded by February 25.

The agreement appeared to ease the standoff between Roble and Farmajo, who said in a statement late Monday that he applauded the "positive result" on the election timetable.

The crisis had set alarm bells ringing in the international community, which fears it threatens the stability of a fragile country still battling a violent insurgency by Al-Shabaab.

The Al-Qaeda-linked terrorists have been waging a deadly campaign against the weak central government since 2007 but were driven out of Mogadishu in 2011 after an offensive by an African Union force.

However, the militants retain control of vast rural areas of Somalia, from which they frequently launch deadly attacks in the capital and elsewhere against civilian, military and government targets.

UK PM apologises for attending lockdown-breaching party

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson apologised on Wednesday for attending a gathering at his official residence during the first coronavirus lockdown as opponents said he had to resign.

Johnson admitted for the first time he had attended the party at Downing Street on May 20, 2020, when social gatherings were limited to a bare minimum and said he understood the anger that the revelations had caused, according to Reuters.

"I know the rage they feel with me over the government I lead when they think that in Downing Street itself the rules are not being properly followed by the people who make the rules," an ash-faced Johnson told Parliament.

Johnson, who won a landslide 2019 election victory on a promise to secure Britain's exit from the European Union, said he regretted his action and had thought the gathering was a work event.

"I went into that garden just after six on the 20th of May 2020 to thank groups of staff before going back into my office 25 minutes later to continue working," he said. "With hindsight, I should have sent everyone back inside."

Opposition leader Keir Starmer said Johnson must now resign and that the public thought he was a liar.

"The party's over, prime minister," Starmer told him. "The only question is: Will the British public kick him out? Will his party kick him out? Or will he do the decent thing and resign?"

Some of Johnson's own Conservative members of Parliament have said that how he responded to the growing furore would determine whether he could remain in office.

"His survival is in the balance at the moment," said one senior Conservative lawmaker, speaking on condition of anonymity due to the sensitivity of the situation.

Two snap opinion polls on Tuesday showed well over half of respondents thought Johnson should resign.