

Armenia crisis grows as president blocks bid to fire army chief



People take part in a protest to oust Armenian PM Nikol Pashinyan
Reuters | Yerevan

Armenian President Armen Sarkisian said yesterday he had refused to sign a prime ministerial order to dismiss the army's chief of staff, deepening an entrenched national political crisis.

The move came as several thousand opposition protesters took to the streets of Armenia's capital Yerevan for the third day running to call for the resignation of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan.

They want him to go over his handling of last year's war with Azerbaijan, which many see as a national humiliation.

The fresh protests, which have continued on and off since the fighting ended in November, erupted Thursday when Pashinyan defied a call by the military to resign and accused the army of an attempted coup.

He also ordered the chief of the general staff Onik Gasparyan to be fired -- but yesterday, Armenian President Sarkisian, whose role is largely ceremonial, said in a statement that he would not back the move.

"The president of the republic, within the framework of his constitutional powers, returned the draft decree with objections," the presidency said.

The political crisis "cannot be resolved through frequent personnel changes", the statement added.

The leadership of the small South Caucasus nation appeared to be at an impasse.

Soon after the announcement, Pashinyan wrote on Facebook that he would send the order to the presidency once more, saying its decision



had not defused the crisis "at all".

Meanwhile, several thousand opposition protesters marched through central Yerevan, calling for the prime minister's resignation. Many more leaned out of windows and balconies along the way to cheer them on.

By 7:30 pm (1530 GMT) the procession arrived at the parliament building, where some protesters have set up camp, an AFP correspondent reported.

Roughly 5,000 demonstrators gathered there for a rally earlier in the day, urging lawmakers to take action.

"Pashinyan must leave for the sake of our state because his position is very weak today. Nobody takes him seriously," Vera Simonyan, a 28-year-old IT specialist, told AFP at the rally.

Former premier Vazgen Manukyan, who has been named by the opposition to replace Pashinyan, told the crowd that he expected the political crisis to be "resolved within two to three days".

Kidnappers release 42 boys abducted from Nigeria school

Twenty-seven students, three staff and 12 members of their families had been abducted last week by an armed gang

● Search for 300 abducted girls continue

Reuters | Maiduguri

Gunmen in Nigeria yesterday released 27 teenage boys who were kidnapped from their school last week in the northern state of Niger, while security forces continued to search for more than 300 schoolgirls abducted in a nearby state.

Schools have become targets for mass kidnappings for ransom in northern Nigeria by armed groups, many of whom carry guns and ride motorcycles.

On Feb. 17, 27 students, three staff and 12 members of their families were abducted by an armed gang who stormed the Government Science secondary school in the Kagara district of Niger state, overwhelming the school's security detail. One boy was killed during the raid.

After their release, boys were seen by a Reuters witness walking with armed security through a dusty village, some struggling to stand and asking for water. A government official said the boys were aged between 15 and 18.



A piece of cloth belonging to one of the students is seen on the ground at the Government Science College in Kagara

"The Abducted Students, Staff and Relatives of Government Science Collage Kagara have regained their freedom and have been received by the Niger State Government," Governor Abubakar Sani Bello said in a tweet.

The release of the schoolboys comes just a day after the raid on a school in Zamfara state where gunmen seized 317 girls.

The recent attacks have raised concern about rising violence by armed gangs and Islamist

insurgents. Jihadist group Boko Haram carries out abductions in Nigeria's turbulent northeast, as does a branch of Islamic State.

The unrest has become a political problem for President Muhammadu Buhari, a retired general and former military ruler who has faced mounting criticism in recent months over high profile attacks by the gangs known locally as "bandits".

Buhari replaced his long-standing military chiefs this month amid worsening vi-

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Governor Abubakar Sani Bello

olence in Nigeria.

In December, gunmen raided a school in northwestern Katsina state and kidnapped nearly 350 boys, who were subsequently rescued by security forces.

Violence and insecurity have compounded the economic challenges faced by citizens in Africa's most populous country and top oil exporter, which is struggling to cope with a fall in revenues due to a slump in crude prices in addition to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The most high profile school kidnapping was that of more than 270 schoolgirls abducted by Boko Haram from the town of Chibok in 2014. Around 100 of them remain missing.

Tiger Woods in "good spirits" after follow up treatment for leg injuries

AFP | Washington

Tiger Woods is recovering and in "good spirits" after a second day of treatment at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center following his horrific rollover solo car smash that left him with serious leg injuries.

The golf superstar was transferred to Cedars-Sinai on Wednesday night after undergoing emergency surgery

the day before at Harbor-UCLA Medical Center to repair compound fractures sustained in each leg in addition to a shattered ankle.

"Tiger and his family want to thank you all for the wonderful support and messages they have received over the past few days," said a statement on Woods' Twitter account. "We will not have any further updates at this time. Thank you for



Tiger Woods

your continued privacy."

The 15-time major champion Woods was driving alone Tuesday morning in a south Los

Angeles suburb when his SUV hit the centre median, crossed into the opposing lane, struck a tree and then rolled over several times.

Friday's statement did not go into detail about what type of follow up treatment Woods is receiving at Cedars-Sinai which is located about 15 kilometres (nine miles) west of Los Angeles and is renowned for treating Hollywood's rich and famous.

Britain says farewell to pandemic hero Captain Tom Moore

AFP | London

Britain bid farewell yesterday to Captain Tom Moore with a nationally televised funeral for the 100-year-old war veteran who became a global hero for his extraordinary fundraising efforts during the pandemic.

Soldiers formed a guard of honour at the small ceremony held by Moore's family at a crematorium in Bedford in central England.

Six soldiers from the Yorkshire Regiment, the successor to the one Moore served in during World War II, carried his coffin, draped with the Union Jack and his military cap and sword as 14 soldiers gave a firing salute.

Later a World War II plane was to perform a fly-past.

Moore died on February 2 after being treated for pneumonia and testing positive for Covid-19.

He raised nearly £33 million (\$45 million, 37.4 million euros) for healthcare charities by completing 100 lengths of his



Soldiers from the British Army's Yorkshire Regiment attend the funeral of Captain Tom Moore at Bedford Crematorium

garden before his 100th birthday in April last year.

The image of the stooped but dapper veteran, leaning on his walking frame and rarely seen without shining military service medals pinned to his blazer, and a regimental tie, was a rare good news story in a gloomy year.

Queen Elizabeth II knighted him in the summer of 2020.

His death was marked by a na-

tionwide clap with Prime Minister Boris Johnson taking part and MPs bowing their heads in parliament.

His funeral was a more private affair, reflecting his family's wishes and the anti-virus restrictions in place.

Only his two daughters Hannah Ingram-Moore and Lucy Teixeira, four grandchildren and his sons-in-law attended.



Captain Tom Moore

Moore's performance of "You'll Never Walk Alone," a charity single that he recorded with Michael Ball, was played at the start of the ceremony.

He had asked for his epitaph to be "I told you I was old," inspired by comedian Spike Milligan whose gravestone says "I told you I was ill."

His ashes were later to be interred in a family plot in his

£33m
(\$45 million, 37.4 million euros) was raised by Captain Tom Moore for healthcare charities by completing 100 lengths of his garden before his 100th birthday in April last year

native Yorkshire in northern England, with his parents and grandparents.

The family set up an online book of condolences that gathered thousands of messages.

"RIP Captain Sir Tom. Truly a life well lived and an inspiration to us all -- shining a light in very dark days," wrote Debbie Mather

"Your courage and determination to reach your goal and the money you raised for the NHS was unbelievable," wrote Sandra Norbrun.

Indian rooster kills owner with cockfight blade

AFP | Hyderabad

A rooster fitted with a knife for an illegal cockfight in southern India has killed its owner, sparking a manhunt for the organisers of the event, police said yesterday.

The bird had a knife attached to its leg ready to take on an opponent when it inflicted serious injuries to the man's groin as it tried to escape, officers said.

The victim died from loss of blood before he could reach a hospital in the Karimnagar district of Telangana state earlier this week, local police officer B. Jeevan told AFP.

The man was among 16 people organising the cockfight in the village of Lothunur when the freak accident took place, Jeevan said.