

# Georgia drops foreign agents law after massive protests

Georgia's parliament on Friday voted to drop a controversial bill that opponents — and thousands of protesters who swarmed the capital earlier this week — warned could stifle dissent and curtail media freedoms, ushering in Russian-style repression. The law would have required media and nongovernmental organizations that receive more than 20% of their funding from foreign sources to register as "agents of foreign influence." Its opponents argued the bill was inspired by a similar law in Russia that is used to silence critics, and could hinder Georgia's aspirations of one day joining NATO and the European Union, AP reported. Lawmakers voted 35-1 against the bill on Friday morning, at a session that lasted just four minutes and featured no discussion. The vote came less than a

day after Georgia's ruling party, Georgian Dream, said it would withdraw the legislation, after protests in Tbilisi swelled to tens of thousands despite being met with tear gas and water cannons. Demonstrations continued on Thursday night and Friday morning, with those gathered saying they wanted to ensure the bill is abandoned and secure the release of more than 100 protesters arrested over the past days. The Georgian Interior Ministry reported on Friday morning that it had freed all 133 people detained at mass rallies outside parliament on Tuesday and Wednesday. However, it added that a probe was ongoing into "instances of violence" that allegedly took place. Pro-European MPs who opposed the bill unfurled national and EU flags during Friday's vote. Khatia Dekanoidze,



a lawmaker from the United National Movement, called the draft legislation a "Russian law" and a "dangerous obstacle" for Georgia's European integration. ● AFP

## Israel's president calls to scrap judicial overhaul as protests mount

Israel's president urged the regime's cabinet to abandon attempts to push through bitterly contested plans to overhaul the judiciary and seek a model with broad support as tens of thousands of protesters returned to the streets on Thursday. The drive by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's

hard-right cabinet to enact sweeping changes to Israel's courts has sparked domestic uproar and alarm among the regime's Western allies. If the proposal passed, it would mean greater cabinet's sway in selecting judges and limit the power of the Supreme Court to strike down legislation.

After weeks of demonstrations that have exposed deep divisions in Israeli society, President Isaac Herzog, who has been mediating between the sides, warned in a televised prime time address of a "disaster". He said Israel had reached a "point of no return" and called on the coalition

cabinet to rethink the proposed legislation, which is strongly backed by nationalist and religious parties. As Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu left on a visit to Rome, he had to elude flag-waving Israelis who clogged the access routes to Ben Gurion Airport with motor convoys. The interventions by Her-

zog and Austin underlined the unusual depth of concern over the proposals, which Netanyahu — on trial on graft charges he denies — says are needed to rein in what it calls activist judges who have interfered in political decision making. Tens of thousands have demonstrated and some

military reservists have also refused to show up for training exercises. The Israeli air force said on Thursday that it had dismissed a reservist officer in the military for trying to orchestrate group walkouts from training flights as part of a spreading protest at judicial reforms.

## Bahrain cancels HRW parliament conference visa

Bahrain revoked entry visas issued to Human Rights Watch to attend an international parliamentary conference, the rights group said on Friday, days after raising concerns about the Persian Gulf state's rights record. The event would have marked the first time that HRW representatives had been able to enter the Persian Gulf state since 2012, according to Reuters. Bahrain, a U.S. ally, will from Saturday host the 146th assembly of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), an international organisation with the motto "For democracy. For everyone". HRW, which has permanent observer status with the IPU and was granted the visas earlier this year, had on Monday called for conference attendees to raise concerns about what it called "the serious repression of human rights in Bahrain". The IPU said it was aware the visas had been revoked by Bahraini authorities. A spokesperson said the IPU did not know of any other delegations that had had restrictions imposed on them to attend the meeting. Bahrain's government communications office did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Rights groups, including HRW, have criticised Bahrain for holding international events, such as last week's annual Formula One race, as a way of distracting from repression of political opposition. The country has, since

a 2011 anti-government uprising, jailed thousands of people, including opposition leaders, sometimes in mass trials. It has also dissolved leading opposition groups. Bahrain's government says it has made key reforms in recent years on human rights, criminal justice and prisoner treatment.



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## German gunman kills 6 at Hamburg Jehovah's Witnesses hall

A gunman stormed a service at his former Jehovah's Witnesses congregation in Hamburg, killing six people before taking his own life after police arrived, authorities in the German port city said Friday.

Police gave no motive for Thursday night's attack. But they acknowledged recently receiving an anonymous tip that claimed the man showed anger toward religious groups and might be psychologically unfit to own a gun, AP reported. Police said an unborn baby also died but didn't say whether the mother was among the dead. Eight people were wounded, and Chancellor Olaf Scholz said the death toll could rise. Scholz, a former Hamburg mayor, lamented the "terrible incident in my home city."

"We are speechless in view of this violence," Scholz said at an event in Munich. "We are mourning those whose lives were taken so brutally." All of the victims were German citizens apart from two wounded women, one with Ugandan citizenship and one with Ukrainian.

Officials said the gunman was a 35-year-old German national identified only as Philipp F., in line with the country's privacy rules. Police said the suspect had left the congregation "voluntarily, but apparently not on good terms," about a year and a half ago. Germany's gun laws are more restrictive than those in the United States, but permissive compared with some European neighbors, and shootings are not unheard of. Last year, an 18-year-old man opened fire in a packed lecture at Heidelberg University, killing one person and wounding three others before killing himself. In January 2020, a man shot dead six people including his parents in southwestern Germany, while a month later, a shooter who posted a racist rant online killed nine people near Frankfurt.



Heavily armed police inspect the area near a Jehovah's Witness church where several people were killed in a shooting in Hamburg, northern Germany, on late March 9, 2023. ● DANIEL REINHARDT/AFP

### NEWS IN BRIEF

#### Xi awarded 3rd term as China's president



AP — Chinese leader Xi Jinping was awarded a third five-year term as the nation's president Friday, putting him on track to stay in power for life at a time of severe economic challenges and rising tensions with the U.S. The vote for Xi was 2,952 to 0 by the National People's Congress, members of which are appointed by the ruling party. Xi, 69, had himself named to a third five-year term as party general secretary in October, breaking with a tradition under which Chinese leaders handed over power once a decade.

#### Mexico's president slams calls for US military to target cartels



AL JAZEERA — Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador rejected calls for the United States military to intervene to stem drug cartel violence in Mexico, saying such a move would violate the country's sovereignty. Lopez Obrador said his government was "not going to permit any foreign government to intervene in our territory, much less that a government's armed forces intervene". On Wednesday, Texas Republican Dan Crenshaw asked Obrador why he opposed a proposal the congressman introduced in January, authorising US military force to target drug cartels in Mexico.

#### Malaysia ex-PM Muhyiddin charged with corruption, laundering

AP — Former Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin was charged Friday with corruption and money laundering, making him Malaysia's second ex-leader to be indicted after leaving office. Muhyiddin, 75, pleaded innocent to four charges of abusing his power to obtain 232.5 million ringgit (\$51.4 million) bribes for his party and two charges of money laundering involving 195 million ringgit (\$43 million). His party said he is expected to face an additional charge on Monday.