



**SYDNEY (Reuters)** -- Australia said on Monday Indo-Pacific and Southeast Asian countries are facing serious defense threats as it set aside more funds for a maritime security pact with ASEAN countries during a summit with the Southeast Asian bloc. Foreign Minister Penny Wong said Australia would invest \$64 million (\$41.8 million) over four years, including \$40 million in new funding, which would contribute to the security and prosperity of the region, consistent with the priorities of Southeast Asian countries. "We face destabilizing, provocative and coercive actions including unsafe conduct at sea and in the air," Wong said in a speech at the summit, adding free and open sea lanes in the South China Sea was critical for the region's trade. Australia last year said it would conduct more joint patrols with Philippines in the South China Sea. Melbourne is hosting the summit from Monday to Wednesday to mark 50 years of Australia becoming the first external partner of ASEAN.

**MELBOURNE (AFP)** -- Philippine foreign minister Enrique Manalo told AFP on Monday that his country wants to solve maritime disputes with China peacefully. Speaking on the sidelines of an ASEAN-Australia summit in Melbourne, Manalo defended his government's policy of publicizing Chinese maneuvers in contested maritime territory -- including the recent passage of warships near Scarborough Shoal. "It's merely trying to inform the people of what's going on," Manalo said. "And some countries or one country at least has some difficulty with that." China claims almost the entire South China Sea as its territory, brushing aside claims from a host of Southeast Asian nations. Scarborough Shoal -- a triangular chain of reefs and rocks in the disputed South China Sea -- has been a flashpoint between the countries since China seized it from the Philippines in 2012. "The Philippines is committed to a peaceful resolution of disputes through diplomatic means, or peaceful means," Manalo said, while insisting "this will not be done at the expense of our national interest."

**CARACAS (AFP)** -- Venezuelan soldiers have evicted more than 1,200 people, many of them children, from an illegal gold mine that claimed 16 lives when it collapsed last month, the armed forces said Sunday. The group included 131 minors evicted from the Bulla Loca mine in the Bolivar state in the Amazon region, general Domingo Hernandez Larez, of the armed forces' operational command said in a message on X. He did not provide a time frame. Evictions were continuing, as was the dismantling of illegal mining structures erected in the La Paragua Forest Reserve, he added. "Protecting nature is everyone's task!" said Hernandez Larez. The Bolivar region is rich in gold, diamonds, iron, bauxite, quartz, and coltan. Aside from state mines, there is also a booming industry of illegal extraction. Sixteen people died when the Bulla Loca open pit mine caved in last month. In December last year, 12 died when a mine in the same region, collapsed.

**NEW DELHI (AFP)** -- The drivers of a train that missed a signal and ploughed into another train, killing 14 people, were distracted because they were watching cricket on a phone, India's railways minister said Monday. The fatal collision in Andhra Pradesh state in October took place as hosts India played in England during the one-day World Cup. "The recent case in Andhra Pradesh happened because both the loco-pilot and co-pilot were distracted by the cricket match," Minister of Railways Ashwini Vaishnaw said, the Press Trust of India news agency reported. Hundreds of millions of fans in cricket-crazy India tuned in to watch the live broadcast of the World Cup match, which the hosts won. Separately, officials sacked the station master and three other employees after a runaway freight train travelled 70 kilometers (40 miles) without a driver last month, the Hindustan Times reported. The men were removed from their posts for negligence after some 50 carriages barreled on solo for close to two hours.

**BUDAPEST (Reuters)** -- Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban will meet former U.S. President Donald Trump on March 8 in Florida, Orban's press chief told Hungarian state news agency MTI late on Sunday. Last month nationalist Orban endorsed Trump's bid to return to the U.S. presidency this year. Orban has refused to send weapons to Ukraine to help it fight off Russia's invasion, and has criticized Western sanctions against Russia. He has repeatedly urged a ceasefire in Ukraine to end the war. The Hungarian premier, in power since 2010, has faced tensions with President Joe Biden's administration, mainly over Budapest's foot-dragging concerning the ratification of Sweden's NATO membership. After a long delay, Hungarian parliament last week approved Sweden's NATO bid, and now the legislation only waits a final sign off by the Hungarian President this week. Orban has said the next U.S. presidential election this year and the vote for the European Parliament in June would be crucial as conservatives in Europe and the U.S. must fight together to "reconquer" institutions in Washington and Brussels from liberals who -- as Orban said -- threaten Western civilization.

# Kremlin: Leak Shows West's Participation in Ukraine War



Ambassador of Germany to Russia Alexander Graf Lambsdorff leaves the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Moscow.

MOSCOW (AFP) -- The Kremlin on Monday said the content of leaked conversations between German officials discussing potential strikes on Crimea proved Western countries were participating in the conflict in Ukraine.

The leaks came as an embarrassment for Berlin, which is under pressure to supply Taurus missiles to Kyiv struggling with ammunition shortages.

The conversations "once again highlight the direct involvement of the collective West in the conflict in Ukraine," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

A 38-minute recording of talks between German officers was posted late on Friday on Russian social media.

The officers were discussing the possible use in Ukraine of German-made Taurus missiles and their potential impact.

Topics included aiming the missiles at targets such as a key bridge over the Kerch strait linking the Russian mainland to Crimea, which was annexed by Russia in 2014.

Germany said it believed the recording featured an "intercepted" conversation in the air force division but could not tell whether or not it had been edited.

The Kremlin spokesman said the recording "in itself suggests that the Bundeswehr is discussing substantively and specifically plans to strike Russian territory."

Peskov was speaking as the German

ambassador to Russia was summoned to the foreign ministry in Moscow.

Ambassador Alexander Graf Lambsdorff left the ministry building without giving any comment, Russian news agencies reported.

The day before, Germany had accused Russian President Vladimir Putin of trying to sow disunity with the leak.

"It is about using this recording to destabilize and unsettle us," said German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius, adding that he "hoped that Putin will not succeed".

Pistorius said he was not aware of any further leaks at the army and added that he would await the result of a military probe into the case before drawing any conclusions.

Kyiv has long been clamoring for Germany to provide it with Taurus missiles, which can reach targets up to 500 kilometers (about 300 miles) away.

Chancellor Olaf Scholz has so far refused to send the missiles, fearing that it would lead to an escalation of the conflict with a nuclear-armed Russia.

With Russia's offensive in Ukraine in its third year, Kyiv has ramped up its pleas for more military support from allies.

On the frontlines, its soldiers are outgunned and outnumbered and ammunition shortages are being felt.

France and Britain have supplied Kyiv with SCALP or Storm Shadow missiles, both of which have a range of about 250 kilometers.

# Haiti in State of Emergency Amid Gang Violence



A motorcyclist reacts while driving through a burning barricade, one of many across several neighborhoods that forced residents to take shelter, in Port-au-Prince, Haiti on January 18, 2024.

PORT-AU-PRINCE (Reuters) -- Haiti's government declared a state of emergency on Sunday evening, following violent clashes in the capital that have damaged communications and led to two prison breaks as a major gang leader seeks to oust Prime Minister Ariel Henry.

In order to restore order, the government has imposed with immediate effect a curfew throughout the West territory for a "renewable period of seventy-two hours," the statement said.

"Between six in the evening and five in the morning on Monday 4, Tuesday 5, Wednesday 6 and this Sunday, March 3 2024," the curfew will apply.

The emergency decree follows a

dramatic escalation in violence over the weekend that has paralyzed parts of the capital, damaged communications and led to two prison breaks, including one at the country's largest prison.

The chairman of Digicel, a major telecoms provider to the Caribbean country, said that lines had been affected following days of street violence in parts of the capital.

Heavy gunfire has caused panic in recent days after calls by gang leader Jimmy Cherizier, a former police officer, for criminal groups to unite and overthrow Henry. Cherizier heads an alliance of gangs and faces sanctions from the UN and the United States.

Armed groups on Saturday night attacked the country's largest prison,

defying Haitian police forces who had called for help.

It was unclear how many inmates were on the run. Sources close to the institution said it was likely an "overwhelming" majority. The penitentiary, built to hold 700 prisoners, held 3,687 as of February last year, according to rights group RNDDH.

One voluntary prison worker on Sunday said that 99 prisoners had opted to remain in their cells for fear of being killed in the crossfire. These included several retired Colombian soldiers who were jailed for their alleged involvement in the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse.

The bodies of three inmates who had attempted to flee lay dead in the courtyard of the jail complex on Sunday.

Cherizier this week warned locals to keep children from going to school to "avoid collateral damages" as violence surged in the prime minister's absence.

Nearly 15,000 people have been forced to leave their homes in recent days, with 10 sites hosting internally displaced people emptied over the weekend, according to the UN International Organization for Migration (IOM).

Prime Minister Henry, who came to power in 2021 after the assassination of the country's last president, Moïse, had previously pledged to step down by early February. He later said security must first be re-established in order to ensure free and fair elections.

# South Korea to Suspend Licenses of Striking Doctors

SEOUL (AFP) -- South Korea said Monday it will take steps to suspend the licenses of striking trainee doctors who have defied orders to return to work in a standoff over medical training reforms.

Around 9,000 junior doctors walked out nearly two weeks ago to protest against an increase in medical school admissions from next year which is meant to help combat shortages and meet the demands of an ageing society.

The striking trainees have defied a February 29 government deadline for them to return to work or face legal action, including possible arrest or suspension of their medical licenses.

Despite repeated government appeals, the number returning to work "has been minimal", Second Vice Health Minister Park Min-soo told a press conference.

"Starting today the government is enforcing legal measure," he said, noting inspections at hospitals nationwide would be conducted on Monday to find out who had returned or not.

If doctors' "absence is confirmed" by the on-site inspections, he said, the government would notify them that procedures to suspend their licenses were underway.

"If they violate the government's back to work order, a three-month-suspension is inevitable."

Such a suspension would lead to a delay of at least a year in getting a specialization medical certificate, he warned,

and negatively affect career prospects.

As of Thursday nearly 9,000 trainee doctors, or 72 percent of the whole junior workforce, were on walkouts, Park said.

Only 565 doctors had resumed work by the deadline, according to figures released by the health ministry.

The mass work stoppage has taken a toll on hospitals, with crucial treatments and surgeries cancelled, prompting the government to raise its public health alert to the highest level.

Around half of the surgeries scheduled at some major hospitals have been cancelled since last week, according to the health ministry.

The warning Monday followed the government's February 29 deadline for the trainee doctors to return to hospitals while remaining firm on its plan to increase medical school admissions by 65 percent.

South Korea's government is pushing to admit 2,000 more students to medical schools annually from next year to address what it calls one of the lowest doctor-to-population ratios among developed nations.

Doctors fear the reform will erode the quality of service and medical education, but proponents accuse medics of trying to safeguard their salaries and social status.

Polling shows up to 75 percent of the public support the reforms.

# U.S., South Korea Begin Large Military Drills



South Korean army soldiers pass by a military guard post at the Imjingak Pavilion in Paju, South Korea, near the border with North Korea, July 19, 2023. S

SEOUL (Dispatches) -- South Korean and U.S. militaries kicked off their spring drills on Monday with twice the number of troops joining compared to last year, officials said.

The South Korean and U.S. forces began a computer-simulated command post training called the Freedom Shield exercise and a variety of field exercises for an 11-day run, the South Korean Defense Ministry said.

The allies' air forces also began their annual, battalion-level Ssangmae exercises for a five-day run, Seoul's defense ministry said Monday.

Freedom Shield will involve twice the number of troops from both sides compared with last year in 48 rounds of combined field training, including air assault and air strikes, South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) said.

The exercises are primarily aimed at neutralizing North Korea's nuclear threats, including by "identifying and striking" cruise missiles, which Pyongyang had indicated could carry nuclear warheads, JCS spokesperson Colonel Lee Sung-jun said.

A nuclear attack scenario will be integrated into summertime drills, he added.

American strategic assets such as an aircraft carrier and bombers could participate, South Korea's Yonhap news agency said. U.S. Forces Korea said such assets will likely be deployed in line with past practices but

declined to elaborate citing security protocol.

"Strategic" is a term often used to describe nuclear forces. Pyongyang has angrily reacted to the allies' drills, calling them rehearsals for a nuclear war.

South Korea's military said last week that it would conduct 48 field exercises with the U.S. forces this spring, twice the number conducted last year, and that they would involve live-firing, bombing, air assault and missile interception drills.

The United States and South Korea have expanded their training exercises and increased the deployment of powerful U.S. military assets such as aircraft carriers and long-range nuclear-capable bombers.

In response, North Korea has conducted more than 100 rounds of missile tests since early 2022 to modernize its arsenal as talks with the United States and South Korea have been stalled for an extended period.

This year, North Korea carried out six rounds of missile tests and barrage of artillery firing drills. Its leader Kim Jong Un also said North Korea would scrap its long-standing goal of peaceful unification with South Korea and take a more aggressive military posture along the disputed sea boundary with South Korea. He also vowed to "annihilate" South Korea and the United States if provoked, a threat that he had previously issued.

# Shehbaz Sharif Takes Oath as Pakistan's New PM



Newly elected Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, delivers speech after elected as Pakistan's prime minister for second term, in the National Assembly building in Islamabad, March 3, 2024.

ISLAMABAD (Reuters) -- Pakistan's Shehbaz Sharif took the oath on Monday to officially become prime minister for a second time, nearly four weeks after an uncertain national election caused delays in the formation of a coalition government.

Sharif, 72, officially took up office at a swearing-in ceremony at the presidential office in the nation's capital, Islamabad, a day after parliament elected him prime minister despite protests from lawmakers aligned with jailed former premier Imran Khan.

Sharif wore a black traditional overcoat, called a sherwani, in the ceremony, broadcast live on state TV and attended by civil, military, bureaucracy and other dignitaries.

Candidates backed by Khan gained the most seats in the Feb. 8 election but the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP)

agreed to form a coalition government. The PML-N is spearheaded by Shehbaz Sharif's elder brother, three time premier Nawaz Sharif, but he decided not to take the prime minister's post.

The younger Sharif returns to the role he previously held until August, when parliament was dissolved to prepare for the election.

Economists, investors and foreign capitalists would now be watching closely for an announcement by Sharif on the cabinet, especially the important finance portfolio. The next finance minister will have to immediately undertake tough talks with the International Monetary Fund to get a new multi-billion dollar funding agreement, with the current one expiring in April.

Former four-time finance minister Ishaq Dar remains the top contender, PML-N sources have told Reuters, though several other candidates were being seriously considered.