

International

Philippines prepares to evacuate workers in ME over rising tensions

Around 2.3 million people from Philippines working in region

MANILA: The Philippines is preparing to evacuate thousands of Filipinos working in the Middle East as regional tensions rise following the killing of a top Iranian commander by the United States. About 2.3 million people from the Philippines are working in the Middle East as domestic helpers, construction workers, engineers and nurses.

President Rodrigo Duterte has ordered the armed forces to prepare air and naval assets for the evacuation of Filipinos in Iraq, Iran and nearby Arab countries, his spokesman Salvador Panelo said yesterday. Saying he was deeply worried about the prospect of a "protracted war", Duterte told reporters he sent a special envoy to Tehran and Baghdad to get assurances that Filipinos would be provided safe passage in case of evacuation. "We have so many Filipinos working mainly in the Middle East. I am nervous. Iran seems to be hell-bent on a retaliation, which I think will come," Duterte said in a speech on Monday.

There are close to 7,000 Filipinos working and living in Iraq and more than 1,000 in Iran, according to government data. Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana, who heads a newly created committee to prepare the evacuation, said the government is readying aircraft to ferry

Filipinos in Iraq and Iran who wish to come home or be evacuated to safer areas.

"We can send transportation to fetch them," Lorenzana told reporters, adding that hiring a cruise ship was among the things the government was considering to safely evacuate those who would wish to be repatriated. Iran is considering 13 scenarios to avenge Friday's killing of Qassem Soleimani by a US drone attack in Iraq, a senior Tehran official said yesterday as the general's body was brought to his hometown for burial. Filipinos in the Middle East sent home \$5.4 billion in remittances in January to October last year, accounting for a fifth of total remittances for that period, making the region a major source of foreign exchange inflows which help drive growth in the consumption-led Philippine economy.

In Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia's Foreign Minister Saifuddin Abdullah advised Malaysians to defer nonessential travel to the region, "in particular areas where the security situation is critical", and for citizens in the region to register with their nearest foreign mission. "The ministry advises all Malaysians residing, or currently travelling to the region to be more vigilant and take the necessary precautions to ensure their safety and security," Saifuddin told at a press conference. — Reuters



About 2.3 million people from the Philippines are working in the Middle East as domestic helpers, construction workers, engineers and nurses. — AFP file photo

Japan issues arrest warrant for Ghosn's wife

TOKYO: Tokyo prosecutors yesterday issued an arrest warrant for Carlos Ghosn's wife Carole for allegedly lying in testimony, as officials sought ways to bring the fugitive car industry boss back for trial on financial misconduct charges. The perjury arrest warrant accuses Carole Ghosn of falsely claiming not to know, or to have met, people connected to a company that received payments from Nissan Motor, part of which it subsequently transferred to a firm owned by Ghosn.

Separately, a senior Ministry of Justice official said staff were poring over Lebanese laws to find a way to return Ghosn and that Japan "will do whatever it can" to have him face trial.

The former Nissan and Renault SA chairman is scheduled to hold a news conference today, his first such appearance since his arrest in November 2018 and his dramatic flight last month to Lebanon, his childhood home. "Last time Carlos Ghosn announced a press confer-



BEIRUT: A handout picture provided by the Lebanese photo agency Dalati and Nohra yesterday shows President Michel Aoun (left) meeting with Japanese Ambassador Takeshi Okubo at the presidential palace in Baabda. — AFP

ence and got re-arrested. This time, the day before he is announced to speak out freely for the first time, they issued an arrest warrant for his wife Carole Ghosn," a spokeswoman for Ghosn told Reuters in Beirut.

Claims

Ghosn is expected to detail some of the claims he has made against Nissan since his arrest. Citing an interview with Ghosn, Fox Business reported that he said he has "actual evidence" and documents to show

there was a Japanese government-backed coup to "take him out". He plans to identify those he believes responsible, the broadcaster said. In earlier court filings seen by Reuters and statements released by his lawyers in Japan, Ghosn has claimed that he was unseated to destroy any possibility of a merger between Nissan and Renault, accusing Nissan executives of colluding with Japanese prosecutors and Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry officials.

Ghosn's legal team in Japan also said prosecutors withheld evidence, citing concerns voiced by Nissan that it included sensitive information about operations and employees. Nissan said Ghosn's flight from Japan would not affect its policy of holding him responsible for "serious misconduct".

"The company will continue to take appropriate legal action to hold Ghosn accountable for the harm that his misconduct has caused to Nissan," the automaker said in a statement.

Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary, Yoshihide Suga, yesterday, described Ghosn's escape to Beirut as "regrettable" and said Tokyo had asked Lebanon for help, although he declined to say what exactly Japan had asked of Lebanon. "It's necessary to carefully consider the legal systems of both countries," he told a news conference, Lebanon does not normally extradite its citizens. — Reuters

News in brief

Earthquake in Indonesia

BANDA ACEH, Indonesia: A strong earthquake jolted Indonesia's northwest yesterday, but no tsunami warning was issued and there were no immediate reports of injuries or damage. The 6.2 magnitude quake struck at a depth of 20 kilometers (12.5 miles) just off the coast of Simeulue island, west of Sumatra, according to the US Geological Survey. Indonesia's weather and geophysics bureau said there was no tsunami threat. People panicked and ran outside their homes when the quake hit. "We are now watching at the beach to monitor the movement of seawater," Simeulue resident Ahmadi told AFP. No casualties or infrastructure damage have been reported so far. — AFP

Thais asked to shower less

BANGKOK: Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha yesterday urged people to turn off taps and shower less to cope with a drought afflicting northern and central Thailand. Last week, Bangkok's water authority said the capital's tap water was becoming saline as seawater pushed up the depleted Chao Phraya river, a source of much of central Thailand's water. The cabinet agreed yesterday to spend 3 billion baht (\$100 million) on boreholes and pipes to extract ground water to relieve a drought that is expected to worsen in the next few months, a government spokeswoman told reporters. Thailand's dry season started in November and usually lasts through April, although this year authorities say it could go on through June. A drought has been declared in 14 provinces in the central, northern and northeastern farming regions. — AFP

Pakistan military jet crashes, 2 die

ISLAMABAD: A Pakistan military aircraft crashed near an air base yesterday, killing two pilots, an air force spokesman said. The FT-7 jet came down on a routine training mission near the central district of Mianwali, the spokesman added. He named the pilots as Squadron Leader Haris bin Khalid and Flying Officer Ibaad-ur-Rehman and said a board of inquiry would look into what caused the crash. — Reuters

S Korea's Moon seeks Kim visit to Seoul

SEOUL: South Korean President Moon Jae-in yesterday called for better relations with the North so leader Kim Jong Un can visit Seoul, despite Pyongyang's abandonment of its nuclear and missile test moratoriums. Moon's appeal came after Kim threatened a demonstration of a "new strategic weapon" at a four-day ruling party meeting last week, where he never mentioned South Korea.

Since the breakdown of Kim's summit with US President Donald Trump in Hanoi last year—which left nuclear negotiations largely deadlocked—Pyongyang has repeatedly lashed out at the South, saying it has "nothing to talk" about any more with Seoul.

One senior official has gone as far as describing the South's presidency as a "shy dog barking more wildly". But Moon, who has long favored engagement with the nuclear-armed North, doubled down on his dovish approach.

"I hope South and North Korea can make efforts together so that the conditions for Chairman Kim Jong Un's reciprocal visit can be arranged at an early date," Moon said in his annual New Year address.

The invitation for Kim to visit Seoul dates from the two leaders' last summit, in Pyongyang in September 2018, when the peninsula was basking in a diplomatic rapprochement. Analysts suggested Moon's call was now unrealistic. "I'm willing to meet repeatedly and talk ceaselessly" with the North, Moon said in his half-hour speech, which was broadcast live.

He also suggested Pyongyang and Seoul should consult on fielding a unified team at the Tokyo Olympics in July, which would march together at the opening ceremony. The two Koreas' athletes took part together at the opening and closing ceremonies of the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics in the South two years ago, and subsequently formed a series of joint teams in other events.

A possible joint bid for Seoul and Pyongyang to co-host the 2032 Summer Games has even been mooted, with Moon yesterday calling the prospect "a golden opportunity for the South and North to show to the world that we are one people". — AFP

Firefighters race to contain blazes as heatwave looms across Australia

SYDNEY: Firefighters raced to contain massive bushfires in southeastern Australia yesterday, taking advantage of a brief drop in temperatures and some much-needed rainfall before another heatwave strikes later this week. Exhausted volunteers cleared ground vegetation and carried out controlled burns before temperatures and winds were expected to pick up again by Friday. "It really is about shoring up protection to limit the damage potential and the outbreak of the fires over the coming days," said New South Wales Rural Fire Service commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons.

He described current conditions as "much more favourable" but warned "we are expecting hotter weather to return later in the week". Dozens of vast blazes continue to burn out of control across the east of the country and there are growing fears that two fires in New South Wales and Victoria could connect to form another uncontrollable megablaze.

Rainfall on Monday offered modest relief, but it was not heavy enough in most areas to extinguish the fires, and in some places it hampered firefighters' preparations by making back-burning more difficult.

Twenty-five people have died since the start of the disaster in September, more than 1,800 homes have been destroyed, and some eight million hectares (80,000 square kilometers) has burned, an area the size of Ireland or South Carolina. Smoke from the fires has been spotted more than 12,000 kilometers (7,400 miles) away in Chile and Argentina, weather authorities in the South American countries said. The cost of the disaster is still not clear, but the Insurance Council of Australia said claims worth Aus\$700 million (\$485 million) had already been filed and the figure was expected to climb significantly.

The government has earmarked an initial Aus\$2 billion (\$1.4 billion) for a national recovery fund to help devastated communities. The human toll was again laid bare yesterday, as firefighters held a memorial in Sydney for 36-year-old colleague Andrew O'Dwyer who died battling blazes in late December.

Volunteers in bright orange fire suits lined the road as his cortege passed—with the coffin draped in a Rural Fire Service flag.

Conditions in the next week are not expected to match the worst days of the crisis, but Fitzsimmons told public broadcaster ABC it was important not to "get lulled into a false sense of security". Many of the blazes are too big to be put out, so only sustained rainfall would end the crisis. There were some faint signs yesterday that a reprieve may be on the way, as tropical cyclone Blake brought heavy rain to the northwestern coast. Blake is not expected to have an impact on the bushfires raging in other parts of the massive country, but could signal a change in hot and dry conditions that have fuelled the fires. — AFP



WAGAH: Indian Border Security Force personnel (dressed in brown) and Pakistani Rangers (dressed in black) take part in the Beating Retreat ceremony at the India-Pakistan border in Wagah, some 35 km from Amritsar on Monday. — AFP

Pakistan parliament extends term of army chief

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan's parliament yesterday approved extending the term of the army chief for another three years despite the objections of some parties, which accuse the military of heavy-handed tactics in its anti-militant operations along the Afghan border. Pakistan has been ruled by the powerful military for about half its history and tension between civilian governments and the top generals often dominates politics. Any effort by a military chief to consolidate power is viewed with suspicion.

But critics of Prime Minister Imran Khan say his government enjoys the support of the military which is why the government approved the extension for Chief of Army Staff General Qamar Javed Bajwa in August. The government cited a worsening national security situation with old rival India as justification for the extension for Bajwa at the end of the usual three-year term.

But in a surprise ruling, the Supreme Court struck down the extension in November, ordering the government and army to produce legal provisions and arguments for the reappointment, pitting the judiciary against the govern-

ment and powerful military. The government responded by drafting legislation which the lower house of parliament approved yesterday, clearing the way for the extension. It must still be approved by the upper house, which is expected. "All parties shunned their differences and stood united in the best national interest," Information Minister Firdous Ashiq Awan told reporters outside the parliament.

The two main opposition parties have a long history of clashing with the military but nevertheless backed the legislation, largely, analysts say, to avoid a damaging confrontation. Two smaller parties and some members of parliament from troubled northwestern districts along Afghan border opposed it. They accuse the military of committing rights abuses during its anti-militant operations. The army rejects such accusations.

"This parliament's majority is fake, this prime minister is fake," said Asad Mahmood, parliamentary leader of the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (F) religious political party, which says it unfairly lost seats in the northwest to Khan's party. "We will not support any such amendment in the law by a fake parliament."

The military sets defense and security policy and also dominates foreign affairs. Recently, it has also had a role in framing economic policies. Opposition activists and rights groups have also accused the military under Bajwa of meddling in politics, limiting civil liberties and muzzling the media. The military denies interfering in politics or curbing freedoms. — Reuters