

International

US orders diplomats out of Myanmar as violence spirals

Suu Kyi in good health; Japan suspends new aid

YANGON: The United States yesterday ordered the departure of non-essential diplomats from Myanmar, amid growing violence following the military coup to oust civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Daily protests demanding the restoration of the elected government have been met with a military crackdown that has left more than 520 civilians dead in the weeks since the February 1 coup. The junta's violent response has triggered international condemnation and threats of retaliation from some of Myanmar's myriad ethnic armed groups. The US State Department said it was ordering the departure of "non-emergency US government employees and their family members". The decision was taken to protect the safety and security of staff and their families, the State Department said.

Meanwhile, Myanmar's ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi appears in good health despite two months of detention, her legal team said yesterday as diplomatic pressure on the military junta ramped up.

The 75-year-old Suu Kyi has not been seen in public since she was deposed by the military and detained in the early hours of February 1. But a member of her legal team, Min Min Soe, was summoned to a police station in the capital Naypyidaw for a video meeting with her yesterday. Suu Kyi is facing a raft of criminal charges and conviction could see her barred for life from political office. "The physical situation of DASSK (Suu Kyi) seemed good according to her appearance on video screen," her legal team said in a statement.

World powers have repeatedly condemned the violent crackdown on dissent and hit top junta cadres with sanctions. But the pressure has not swayed the generals. Saturday, the annual Armed Forces Day, saw the biggest loss of life so far, with at least 107 people killed.

The spiraling bloodshed has angered some of Myanmar's 20 or so armed ethnic groups, who control large areas of territory mostly in border regions. Three of them—the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, the Myanmar Nationalities Democratic Alliance Army and the Arakan Army (AA) — on Tuesday threatened to join protesters' fight unless the military reined in its crackdown. While the trio has yet to act on their warning, two other outfits—the Karen National Union (KNU) and the



This handout from Kawkaik Open News taken and released yesterday shows children taking part in a demonstration against the military coup in Kawkaik township in Myanmar's Karen state. — AFP

Kachin Independence Army (KIA) — have stepped up attacks on military and police in recent days.

A police station in Bago was reportedly hit with a rocket attack that injured five officers on Tuesday, though it was not clear who was responsible. The KNU, one of the biggest rebel groups, took over an army base in eastern Kayin state at the weekend, prompting the military to respond with air strikes.

Wounded cross border

Around 3,000 people fled through the jungle to seek safety across the border in Thailand after the weekend strikes. The Thai foreign ministry said late Tuesday about 2,300 have returned to Myanmar, while about 550 remain in Thailand. Karen activists have accused the Thai authorities of pushing people back and accused them of blocking UN refugee officials from the area. Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha insisted that there was "no influx" of refugees and that the kingdom's authorities had not "scared them off with guns or

xsticks". Some Karen people injured in the weekend strikes sought medical treatment Tuesday on the Thai side of the border—the most serious case was a 15-year-old with a collapsed lung and broken rib.

Thai police said they had intercepted 10 parcels containing 112 grenades and 6,000 rounds of ammunition in northern Chiang Rai province that had been destined for Myanmar's notorious border town Tachileik. The UN Security Council will hold an emergency session on Myanmar on Wednesday, requested by former colonial power Britain. The 15 members will meet behind closed doors, beginning with a briefing from the UN's special envoy on Myanmar, Christine Schraner Burgener. Meanwhile, Japan has halted new aid to Myanmar in response to the coup, according to the country's foreign minister, but is stopping short of sanctions imposed by some nations on military and police commanders. Japan is a top aid donor to Myanmar, and Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi said the suspension of assistance would send a "clear" message.—AFP

Reset to rivalry: China and West drift further apart

BEIJING: It only took one meeting for hopes of a reset in US-China relations under a Biden presidency to evaporate—instead alliances are fast forming on either side of an old dividing line: democracy.

The mood music ahead of the mid-March meeting in the Alaskan town of Anchorage between the two countries' top diplomats was upbeat, but their meeting quickly collapsed into mud-slinging in a pattern that has not let up since. Instead, the US has cozied up to its 'Quad' allies in China's backyard—Japan, India and Australia—while cajoling the EU, UK and Canada into aiming sanctions at Chinese officials over their treatment of Muslim minorities in the Xinjiang region. China has swung back with tit-for-tat sanctions of its own against several European Union and UK lawmakers, while sealing deals with Iran and reaffirming friendships with Russia and North Korea.

That has opened up a chasm between Beijing and the West, one increasingly explained in ideological terms but framed by bigger fears of competition over tech, trade and defense. "We are heading towards a bipolar order and a new Cold War between the 'good guys' and the 'bad guys,'" said Jean-Pierre Cabestan, political science professor at Hong Kong Baptist University. Biden is hankering after allies to counterbalance China's rise, a departure from the unilateral actions and trade wars of the Trump era, with human rights and democracy emerging as galvanizing causes for the new anti-Beijing bloc. "There is a new sacred union of democracies on (the issues of) Xinjiang, Hong Kong, human rights in China," Cabestan said. On Tuesday, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken again labeled China's treatment of its Uyghur population a "genocide" and vowed to rally allies to the defense of human rights.

Poles apart

But the Biden administration's retreat of the traditional ground of 'freedom' has deeper aims for democracies challenged by China, said Hua Po, an independent Beijing-based political analyst. Even if the US and their allies have divergent interests, "they agree on the question of human rights. It is a symbol of solidarity," Hua said, amounting to a "multifaceted policy of encirclement" on the strategic, technological and commercial fronts. In the first face-to-face meeting between China and US diplomats on March 18 in Anchorage, Alaska, civilities quickly fell aside. China's top diplomat Yang Jiechi furiously attacked US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, saying the United States "does not represent international public opinion, and neither does the Western world." Foreign minister Wang Yi has since embarked on a frenzy of friend-making, largely with countries also at loggerheads with the West and the US in particular.

Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov was received in China last Monday in a meeting which saw both countries agree that "there is no single model for democracy". Wang followed up with a tour of Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia, where he received Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's support for China's policies in the Xinjiang region, where it has been accused of detaining over a million Uyghur Muslim people. On Saturday, Wang signed a 25-year strategic and commercial cooperation pact between China and Iran with his Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif.

"Beijing is demonstrating that it has friends and other options," said Bonnie Glaser, Senior Adviser for Asia at the Washington Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).—AFP

Wounded Myanmar refugees tell of air strike horror

MAE SUAT, Thailand: Civilians wounded in Myanmar air strikes on rebel positions spoke of their terrifying ordeal after trekking through jungle to seek medical treatment across the border in Thailand. Military jets hit targets in eastern Kayin state over the weekend, as Myanmar reeled from the deadliest day so far in the junta's crackdown on anti-coup protests. The strikes targeted territory held by the Karen National Union (KNU), one of the nation's largest ethnic armed groups, which had earlier seized a military base. They marked the Myanmar military's first use of air strikes against the KNU in 20 years and sent around 7,000 Karen villagers fleeing for safety, according to the armed group.

Naw Eh Tah, one of a handful who managed to cross the Salween River—which marks the border with Thailand—on Tuesday to seek medical treatment, described the moment the bombs hit. "We didn't hear the plane—if we did, we would have run," the 18-year-old told AFP at the small Sop Moei district hospital in Thailand's northern Mae Hong Son province. "By the time I realized what was happening, the explosion hit the roof of my house. "When I got hit, I couldn't walk—I had to climb to hide."

'Bombs dropped so quickly'

Her legs lacerated by shrapnel, Naw Eh Tah trekked for a day through dense tropical jungle to the river. "We crossed because I can't stay—the Myanmar army is all trying to get us," she said.

"I have never seen it (air strikes) before. I am so afraid." The youngest to cross on Tuesday, a 15-year-old, was also the most seriously hurt, with a broken rib and collapsed lung. Saw Lab Bray, 48, suffered shrapnel wounds all over his body when he was hit in KNU stronghold Day Puh Noh.

"I tried to run away but the bombs dropped so quickly," he told AFP from a hospital wheelchair, describing how he saw six people wounded and a man die. "I fell on my side and was coughing blood. I'm afraid because I cannot run, I cannot move." Doctor Chakri Komsakorn said the refugees looked like "they have been through war" with many shrapnel wounds becoming infected due to a lack of medicine.

Australia misses vaccine target amid slow rollout

SYDNEY: Australia will fall well short of its initial COVID-19 vaccination target, Prime Minister Scott Morrison admitted yesterday, claiming European export restrictions were partly to blame. Largely coronavirus-free Australia has been heralded globally as a pandemic success story, but it is one of the few rich nations to have an extremely limited vaccination rollout. So far, just 670,000 doses have been administered in Australia, according to official statistics, far below the initial plan to jab four million people by the end of March.

Morrison said that target had been "dispensed with" months ago, and that strangled exports of three million doses from Europe were "obviously going to impact the early success". "It's not a race," he said, accusing critics of "wanting to play politics with vaccine and distribution". Critics have warned that Australia's slow vaccina-



Karen villagers, injured during air strikes in the area following the February military coup, resting after receiving medical treatment while taking shelter in a jungle near Day Pu No in Hpa-pun in eastern Myanmar's Karen state. — AFP

He added that "many appear to have been starving for many days". Chakri also said he had heard there were people with more serious wounds still trapped on the Myanmar side of the river, unable to cross because of the severity of their injuries. Karen groups say as many as 3,000 people fled across the river into Thailand after the air strikes before being sent back to Myanmar, though Thai officials insist they were not forced back. The Thai foreign ministry said late Tuesday about 2,300 have returned to Myanmar and about 550 remain in Thailand.

'Guns and sticks'

Mae Hong Son Governor Sithichai Jindaluang told a news conference that refugees who had not been badly affected by the bombings agreed to go back when asked. Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha said they had not been "scared off with guns or sticks" and insisted the kingdom would not turn people away if the situation worsened. The air strikes came as the junta struggles to quell nationwide protests demanding a restoration of the elected government and the release of civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi, ousted in the February 1 coup.

Some 50 Myanmar refugees who fled air strikes to neighboring Thailand "voluntarily" returned across the border yesterday, Thai authorities said, despite reports of continued bombings in their home state. Myanmar's military has launched air attacks in eastern Karen state for four straight days—the first such strikes in the area in more than 20 years—forcing 7,000 people to flee their homes.—AFP

tion rate risks new clusters emerging and an indefinite delay in reopening the country's borders.

Richard Holden, an economist at the University of New South Wales, said that Morrison "has to say 'it's not a race'". "Because if it was, we would have been lapped multiple times and be battling it out for 75th place," he tweeted. "Of course it's a race—against the



MELBOURNE: An elderly man leaves a COVID vaccination center in Melbourne yesterday as Australia's Prime Minister acknowledged the country would fall well short of its four million initial COVID-19 vaccination target. — AFP

News in brief

Japan raises alert as volcano erupts

TOKYO: A volcano in southwestern Japan has erupted, flinging large rocks hundreds of meters from the crater and prompting the meteorological agency to raise its alert level. Kyodo news agency reported early yesterday. There were no immediate reports of injuries after the eruption of Mount Otake in Kagoshima prefecture, according to Kyodo. The report said the Japan Meteorological Agency had raised its alert level to a three on a scale of five, meaning that people should not approach the crater. A first eruption reportedly took place just after 10 pm Tuesday, with a second near 3 am yesterday.—AFP

Vietnam jails four activists

HANOI: Four activists have been jailed for up to ten years after Vietnamese courts found them guilty of spreading "anti-state propaganda". Vietnam's communist government is swearing in a new cabinet, with top leaders taking office in the next few days. It is also preparing for legislative elections in May for the rubber-stamp national assembly that has around 500 members. Pressure on human rights activists has coincided with these political events, observers say. In the southern Central Highlands province of Lam Dong on Tuesday, activist Vu Tien Chi, 55, was jailed for 10 years for sharing and posting online articles allegedly defaming the Communist Party and Vietnamese leaders.—AFP

China locks city on Myanmar border

BEIJING: A Chinese city near the border with Myanmar has imposed a lockdown after six coronavirus cases were reported yesterday—the first significant cluster of COVID-19 disclosed in almost two months. Three asymptomatic cases in Ruili, a city of over 210,000 people, were also recorded as Myanmar nationals, aged between 24 and 28, according to health authorities in Yunnan province. Ruili is a major crossing point from Muse in neighboring Myanmar, which has seen escalating unrest since a February 1 military coup, raising fears that people may flood across the border if the violence intensifies.—AFP

Indonesia jet's voice recorder found

JAKARTA: The cockpit voice recorder from a crashed Indonesian passenger jet has been found, the country's transport ministry said yesterday, more than two months after the accident that killed all 62 passengers and crew. Officials said a press briefing "regarding the discovery of the Cockpit Voice Recorder" from the Sriwijaya Air Boeing 737-500 would be held later. The 26-year-old plane—previously flown by US-based Continental Airlines and United Airlines—plunged around 3,000 meters (10,000 feet) into waters off Jakarta just minutes after takeoff on January 9. Divers had been searching the Java Sea for the missing voice recorder—one of the plane's two "black boxes"—which records flight crew conversations.—AFP

Mexican smuggled in killed migrants

LOS ANGELES: A Mexican man accused of smuggling into the United States 13 immigrants who died in a horrific car crash near the border this month has been arrested and charged with federal crimes, prosecutors said Tuesday. The SUV crash—when a packed vehicle collided with a truck in California after crossing the frontier on March 2—made global headlines, and came amid a fresh surge of migrants attempting to enter the country from Mexico and Central America. Jose Cruz Noguez was taken into custody while entering the US Monday after being identified to law enforcement by another suspected smuggler, prosecutors said in a statement.—AFP

virus and outbreaks, and for economic recovery." Early in the pandemic, Morrison had boasted that Australia would be "at the front of the queue" for vaccines after a slew of deals with pharmaceutical firms AstraZeneca, Pfizer and Novavax. His government had set an initial target of having all adults fully vaccinated by October. Yesterday, Morrison indicated that the target had changed, saying "we are on track for our first dose for everyone by the end of October".

The crisis has resulted in some political finger-pointing, with state authorities yesterday angrily rejecting Canberra's claim that they were to blame for the delays. New South Wales premier Gladys Berejiklian—an ally in Morrison's conservative Liberal party—said she was not happy with such "untrue" and "extremely unfair" suggestions. Queensland premier Annastacia Palaszczuk described them as "outrageous". Australia has largely avoided widespread coronavirus transmission but has regularly had to scramble to contain outbreaks originating from hospitals and hotel quarantine for overseas arrivals. Around two million people are currently in lockdown in greater Brisbane—Australia's third-largest city—after around a dozen cases were detected.—AFP