

## International

# 'OPPORTUNITY' FOR SYRIA'S ASSAD IN QUAKE OUTREACH

## POLITICALLY ISOLATED PRESIDENT RECEIVES CALLS, AID FROM ARAB LEADERS

**DUBAI:** Syria's politically isolated President Bashar Al-Assad has received calls and aid from Arab leaders since a devastating earthquake Monday, a momentum analysts say he could leverage to bolster regional support. The 7.8-magnitude pre-dawn quake has killed more than 16,000 people in Turkey and neighboring Syria, already reeling from over a decade of conflict and years of economic sanctions.

Nicholas Heras of the New Lines Institute of Strategy and Policy said mobilization to help quake victims offers Assad an opportunity to restore ties with some Arab countries, but "this humanitarian crisis will not exonerate his regime in Western states." "The horrible tragedy that has struck Syria and Turkey is a clear opportunity for Bashar al-Assad to try to advance the slow-moving... process of normalizing his regime again with the rest of the Arab world," Heras told AFP.

The Syrian president on Tuesday received a call from his Egyptian counterpart offering support, their first official exchange since Abdel Fattah al-Sisi assumed office in 2014. While Cairo and Damascus have maintained relations during the 12-year war, the Arab League suspended Syria in 2011 and some other Arab countries have severed ties with it.

The ruler of Bahrain, which re-established diplomatic relations with Syria in 2018, called Assad on Monday, their first official conversation in more than a decade.

The United Arab Emirates—the first Gulf country to normalize ties with the Assad regime after years of boycott—is spearheading regional relief efforts. Abu Dhabi has already pledged at least \$50 million in assistance and sent several aid planes a day since the quake. Lebanon, which has adopted a policy of dissociation, sent on Wednesday its first high-level official delegation

to Damascus since the start of the conflict.

### 'Use the moment'

Relief efforts could pave the way for "a clear and open channel for sustained diplomatic engagement", Heras said. But Aron Lund of Century International think tank said the messages of support were "routine... after a major natural disaster".

"We'll have to wait and see," the Syria expert told AFP. "Will there be more of these contacts, and will they be sustained beyond the immediate crisis?" "The crisis may lower the threshold for bilateral contacts" between Damascus and Arab states that have so far been reluctant to normalize ties, he added. "Assad will try to use the moment." Saudi Arabia, which severed ties with the Assad regime in 2012 and had backed Syrian rebels in earlier stages of the war, has pledged aid to both rebel-held and government-controlled parts of the country.

Saudi aid will go directly to Aleppo's government-controlled international airport as well as the Damascus-based Syrian Red Crescent, but there was no direct contact with the Assad government, an official at King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre told AFP. Qatar, accused of funding rebels, has also swiftly pledged assistance despite no formal ties. The earthquake could particularly strengthen Syria's ties with rebel-backer Ankara, which have warmed in the months leading up to the quake, Lund said. "Both countries now share a problem that goes beyond borders and political disagreements."

### Western aid

The Assad government has long branded the bloody conflict as a ploy by Western states, and



**DAMASCUS:** Syria's President Bashar Al-Assad (left) meets with Lebanese Foreign Minister Abdallah Bou Habib in Damascus on February 8, 2023. — AFP

blames crippling Western sanctions for a spiraling economic crisis. But that has not stopped Syria's outreach efforts after the earthquake. Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad said on Monday his government was ready "to provide all the required facilities" for international organizations to send aid. And Bassam Sabbagh, Syria's UN envoy, announced it would accept assistance from any country. The Syrian Red Crescent has called on the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to help, and an EU official said Syria has even made an official plea to the bloc.

Janez Lenarcic, the EU's commissioner for crisis management, said on Wednesday the European Commission is "encouraging" member states to respond to Syria's request for medical supplies and food, but would also closely monitor aid to ensure "it is not diverted" by the sanctioned government in Damascus. For its part, the United States said Tuesday it was working with partners to provide relief but would stand firm against working with the Damascus government. "Funds, of course, go to the Syrian people-not to the regime. That won't change," Secretary of State Antony Blinken told reporters.—AFP

## TWO HONG KONGERS GIVEN 5 YEARS FOR INCITING SUBVERSION

**HONG KONG:** A Hong Kong judge sentenced two members of a pro-independence group to five years in prison on Thursday, insisting there would be zero tolerance for advocating violent resistance to China. Choi Wing-kit, 21, and Chris Chan, 26, belonged to the little-known, mostly student-led group Returning Valiant, which used social media and street booths to call for the overthrow of the city's Beijing rulers.

They had pleaded guilty to "conspiracy to incite subversion", under a sweeping national security law which Beijing imposed after huge and sometimes violent democracy demonstrations in 2019. The law has transformed the city, all but ending its boisterous culture of protest and packing courtrooms with dissidents.

The Returning Valiant case is the second-largest under the security law. Among 13 members charged with either subversion or terrorism, 11 were secondary school students. On Thursday, judge Kwok Wai-kin said the group had "promoted bloody resistance without any bottom line to overthrow the current regime".

"This idea ... is absolutely not allowed to emerge in any society," Kwok said. Choi and Chan's sentencing comes after a higher court ruled serious national security crimes must be punished with a minimum of five years imprisonment.

Kwok found the pair's offences particularly serious as the former was the group's founder, and the latter the English interpreter who tried "to promote their ideas to international members". In a separate case, Choi was given six months in prison for "possession of an offensive weapon", a collapsible baton.—AFP



**CALIFORNIA:** Chris Chan and David Chan during the Watch Party for NBC's Quantum Leap, Episode 112 "Let Them Play" at Harlowe on February 06, 2023 in West Hollywood, California. — AFP

## TRAGEDY CUTS SHORT TURKEY TRIP FOR CYPRIOT STUDENTS

**ADIYAMAN:** Two dozen children from northern Cyprus and some of their parents were on a school trip to join a volleyball tournament in Turkey when a massive earthquake hit their hotel. The only thing that remains of it now is a flagpole. Located on the main boulevard of Adiyaman in Turkey's devastated south-east, the hotel was completely flattened. Dozens of other buildings on both sides of the long road have suffered the same fate.

The death toll from the quake that struck Turkey and parts of Syria on Monday has passed 17,500 and been rising by the thousands every day, leaving both countries in a state of shock, grief and profound national trauma.

But the sheer agony wrought by the disaster is hard to fully grasp without looking at the faces of rescuers shouting the Cypriot children's names into the Adiyaman hotel ruins, hoping against hope that someone will respond.

"I have never seen such a thing, such destruction," said Ilhami Bilgen, whose brother Hasan was on the



**TOKYO:** Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos (L) walks with Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida (R) before a meeting at the prime minister's official residence in Tokyo. — AFP

## PHILIPPINES MARCOS STRIKES DEFENCE AND OTHER DEALS IN TOKYO

**TOKYO:** Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos hailed new defence and other deals signed with Japan in Tokyo on Thursday, as the nations seek to deepen ties, including on security in response to growing Chinese military pressure.

The countries agreed on measures to speed up military deployments for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. They also signed several other deals, ranging from infrastructure loans to cooperation on agriculture and technology.

"After our meeting, I can confidently say that our strategic partnership is stronger than ever, as we navigate together the rough waters buffeting our region," Marcos said following talks with Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida. Japan is "one of the Philippines' closest neighbours and closest friends", Marcos told reporters.

His trip comes a week after the Philippines announced a deal giving US troops access to another four bases in the country. Tokyo and Manila are also in preliminary discussions over a key defence pact that would allow them to deploy troops on each others' territory for training and other operations.

Japan, which invaded and occupied the Philippines during World War II, has recently inked similar deals with Britain and Australia. But for now, the leaders are taking an incremental approach to defence cooperation, probably to avoid provoking Beijing, said Renato

volleyball team. Bilgen looked at the frightening pile of concrete slabs and heavy bricks hiding his brother. They were far too heavy to be lifted by hand. And still, he refused to believe that his brother was dead. "There's a hollow over there. The children may have crawled into it," Bilgen said. "We still haven't given up hope."

### Huddled around fires

The 24 students, aged 11 to 14, were staying at the hotel along with 10 parents, four teachers and a trainer, officials told AFP — 39 Turkish Cypriots in all. Nazim Cavusoglu, Turkish Cypriot education minister, said one teacher and three parents were rescued when the quake first struck.

The bodies of two teachers were pulled out of the rubble late Wednesday. "Thirt-three people are still trapped," the minister told AFP. "The students were on a tour to join a school volleyball tournament." Athletes from the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, a breakaway region of the Mediterranean island recognised only by Ankara, are excluded from international tournaments.

The region's government has declared a national mobilisation, hiring a private plane so they can join the search-and-rescue effort for the children. Their 200-member delegation spent the night huddling around an

DeCastro, distinguished professor in the International Studies department at De La Salle University in Manila.

"Both countries are still very much aware that they have touched a sensitive nerve in China (by) creating the possibility of an Asian encirclement of China," DeCastro told AFP. In Beijing's view, "this might be the beginning of an Asian NATO. Because you really have Asian countries strengthening and enhancing their security partnerships."

Worried about Beijing's growing assertiveness on Taiwan and bases in the disputed South China Sea, Manila has been repairing ties with Washington that were fractured in recent years. Given its proximity to Taiwan and surrounding waters, cooperation from the Philippines would be key in the event of a conflict with China.

Japan last year announced a major defence overhaul, pledging to double defence spending to the NATO standard of two percent of GDP by 2027 and designating China the "greatest strategic challenge ever" to its security.

Japanese PM Kishida said the countries would continue to review "cooperation regarding defence equipment, technology and strengthening cooperation between Japan, the US and the Philippines". Japan is also the Philippines' biggest diplomatic source of active development assistance, according to Manila, and its second-largest trading partner.

It is the only country to have a bilateral free trade agreement with the Philippines. On Thursday, the countries also agreed loan agreements and extensions for Philippine infrastructure projects, including \$3 billion to finance major commuter rail projects. — AFP

open fire outside the hotel to stay warm in the winter cold. Similar fires have been burning at night across the affected region, which covers 13.5 million people in Turkey alone.

### Looking for bodies

"We've been here since Monday, with families. We are here with our volunteers. We will wait until this debris is removed, until we get our children out of here," the education minister said. "I saw suitcases filled with gifts-Turkish delights-that were scattered around the rubble," another official from the Turkish Cypriot health ministry said, declining to give her name.

"We don't expect to find any more survivors, but we cannot find the bodies either," she said. Remains of the children's tour bus peeked out of the rubble where the parking lot once stood. The president of the internationally recognised Republic of Cyprus, Nicos Anastasiades, whose relations with the rebel government are extremely strained, sent a message of support. "We reiterate our readiness to contribute and offer our assistance to the humanitarian, rescue and recovery efforts currently taking place," Anastasiades tweeted. "Our hearts and thoughts are with the families and friends of" the missing students, said the United Nations mission in Cyprus. — AFP

## AUSTRALIA TO REMOVE CHINESE-MADE CAMERAS FROM DEFENCE SITES

**SYDNEY:** Australia's defence department will strip its buildings of Chinese-made security cameras to ensure they are "completely secure", the government said on Thursday. It follows similar moves in the United States and Britain, which have taken measures to stop government departments installing Chinese-made cameras at sensitive sites.

Both countries have expressed fears that Chinese companies could be forced to share intelligence collected by the cameras with Beijing's security services. Beijing accused Australia of "misusing national might to discriminate against and suppress Chinese enterprises", calling on Canberra to ensure "fair" treatment for its businesses in the country.

At least 913 Chinese-made cameras have been installed across more than 250 Australian government buildings, according to official figures compiled by opposition politician James Paterson. This includes offices and facilities belonging to the departments of defence, foreign affairs and finance, as well as the attorney-general's department.

Australian Defence Minister Richard Marles said officials would hunt down and remove all Chinese-made security cameras within the department's buildings. "It's a significant thing that's been brought to our attention and we're going to fix it," he told national broadcaster ABC. "It's important that we go through this exercise and make sure that our facilities are completely secure." The government-funded national War Memorial—a sprawling 14-hectare (35 acres) complex in Canberra—also confirmed it would remove a small number of Chinese-made cameras, out of an "abundance of caution".

Other government agencies declined to comment, or referred back to Marles' statements. Paterson, a vocal critic of the Chinese government, had said Australian government buildings were "riddled" with "spyware", and that every Chinese-made camera should be urgently ripped out.

### 'Unacceptable risk'

The cameras were made by companies Hikvision and Dahua, which have been blacklisted in the United States for allegedly helping the Chinese government carry out a "campaign of repression". According to the US Department of Commerce, Hikvision and Dahua have been implicated in the "high-technology surveillance" of the Uyghur minority in the Xinjiang region.

The US banned the import of surveillance equipment made by the two companies in November last year, saying it posed "an unacceptable risk to national security". In Britain, a group of 67 MPs and lords called for the government to ban Hikvision and Dahua in July last year, following reports their equipment had been used to track Uyghurs.

It was a Hikvision CCTV camera that caught former health secretary Matt Hancock kissing an aide in violation of Covid rules in June 2021, leading to his resignation. Hikvision said it was "categorically false" to paint the company as "a threat to national security". —AFP



**MELBOURNE:** People walk past a security camera in Melbourne on February 9, 2023. Australia's defence department will strip its buildings of Chinese-made security cameras to ensure they are "completely secure", the government said. — AFP