

International

Tokyo and Seoul try to bury historical hatchet, hailing 'new future' for ties

Kishida, first Japanese leader to visit South Korea in a decade

SEOUL: Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said Sunday his "heart aches" for Koreans who suffered under colonialism, as Seoul and Tokyo seek a rapid reset of long-strained ties in the face of North Korean threats. Kishida was in Seoul on the first official bilateral visit by a Japanese leader to South Korea in over a decade. He met President Yoon Suk Yeol, who has made improving testy relations with Japan a top priority for his administration.

The East Asian neighbors, both crucial security allies of the United States, have long been at odds over historic issues linked to Japan's brutal 1910 to 1945 colonial occupation of the Korean peninsula, including sexual slavery and forced labor. "My heart aches as many people went through a very difficult and sad experience in the harsh environment at that time," Kishida said, speaking after the summit with Yoon.

Yoon said Kishida's visit showed "shuttle diplomacy"—regular mutual visits and high-level talks—was back on track, after a lengthy pause during a bitter trade spat linked to the forced labor issue.

"Based on the friendship and trust I have with Prime Minister Kishida, I will promote deeper bilateral cooperation toward a new future," said Yoon, who was in Tokyo in March for a fence-mending visit. Bilateral ties were torpedoed in 2018, when South Korea's Supreme Court ordered Japanese firms to compensate the wartime victims of forced labor, enraging Tokyo and triggering an escalating series of tit-for-tat economic measures. But Yoon, who took office last year, has sought to bury the historical hatchet, earlier announcing a plan to compensate victims without direct involvement from Tokyo—a move that was unpopular domestically, but helped improve ties with Japan.



SEOUL: South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol (right) and his wife Kim Keon-hee (second right) receive Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida (second left) and his wife Yuko Kishida (left) during a welcoming ceremony at the presidential office in Seoul on May 7, 2023. — AFP

"As the South Korean government moves forward... I am touched to see how so many people are opening their hearts to the future while not forgetting the hardships of the past," Kishida said Sunday.

'Expression of sincerity'

Experts had widely predicted Tokyo would not offer a new apology, and Kishida stopped short of this, instead reaffirming the "heartfelt apology" made by previous administrations in Tokyo. "There are parts of Kishida's statement that definitely fall short of our expectations," Choi Eunmi, a researcher at the Asan In-

stitute for Policy Studies, told YTN. "But even though he said it was his personal feeling, I would like to note his expression of sincerity. And I think this is meaningful as we are just taking our first step in restoring shuttle diplomacy."

During their March summit, Kishida and Yoon agreed to end tit-for-tat trade curbs, with Kishida inviting the South Korean leader to a G7 meeting in Hiroshima this month. For Yoon, it is long overdue that the two countries "end the vicious cycle of mutual hostility and work together" to improve regional security, he told AFP in March before he flew to Tokyo.

'Grave threat'

Efforts to mend ties come as North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, who last year declared his country an "irreversible" nuclear power, doubles down on weapons development and testing. Pyongyang has conducted a record-breaking string of launches in 2023, including test-firing the country's first solid-fuel ballistic missile—a technical breakthrough. The United States and South Korea have in turn been ramping up their defense cooperation, staging a series of major military exercises including two trilateral drills involving Japan this year.

"Prime Minister Kishida and I shared the recognition that North Korea's nuclear and missile development poses a grave threat to peace and stability not only on the Korean Peninsula and Japan, but also throughout the world," Yoon said Sunday. The two leaders agreed to hold a trilateral meeting with the United States on the sidelines of the upcoming G7 summit.

Yoon recently returned from a state visit to Washington, where he and US President Joe Biden agreed to boost the United States' nuclear defense of South Korea and improve cooperation with Japan.

"Further North Korean provocations and weapons developments are expected soon, so it is important for US allies to stay a step ahead of Pyongyang," said Leif-Eric Easley, a professor at Ewha University in Seoul. "They can do so by better coordinating sanctions enforcement, intelligence sharing, missile defense exercises, and anti-submarine drills. Progress on such trilateral cooperation is likely to be highlighted by a Biden-Yoon-Kishida meeting on the sidelines of the G7 summit in Hiroshima later this month." — AFP

Thais queue at temples, schools as early voting begins

BANGKOK: Thais queued under the blistering sun outside temples, shopping centers and schools to cast their early ballots Sunday ahead of a much-anticipated election next week.

More than two million Thais nationwide are registered to vote early ahead of the kingdom's May 14 election, which is shaping up to be a clash between army-backed establishment parties and resurgent opposition movements. Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, who took power in a 2014 coup before cementing control in a controversial 2019 election, has been languishing in opinion polls with voters favoring old-school opposition party Pheu Thai and the more radical Move Forward Party.

But with an electoral system heavily stacked in favor of the army-backed parties, challengers must achieve a landslide victory to have any hope of forming the next government.

"I hope this election will change the country in a better way," said shopping mall worker Srisuda Wongsa-ad, 28, after casting her ballot. She was among hundreds queuing quietly at a polling station in Bangkok's fashionable Ekkamai district to vote at the Wat That Thong temple, overlooked by golden standing buddhas. "I am voting for a candidate and party that I like, that can answer my needs," she said, adding that she was voting early as it was more convenient for her.

Elsewhere in the capital, the Royal Paragon Hall shopping centre was packed with voters, albeit cooler ones, enjoying the complex's air conditioning. Despite the early hour, temperatures across the capital—which like much of Thailand endured a vicious April heatwave—were soaring and expected to hit 39 degrees Celsius later Sunday. Shortly before midday outside one of Bangkok's largest poll sites at Ramkhamhaeng University, machines sprayed a fine mist of water over orderly queues as the day's heat rose. But crowds were still out in force, with traffic and congestion around busy polling stations.

"I am quite excited," said first-time voter Pasawee Sriarunothai, 20, who will not be in Bangkok on May 14. "I decide to cast my vote based on the party's policies, and I hope this election will bring the country a better future," Pasawee said.—AFP



BANGKOK: Voters queue to cast their ballot during advance voting at a polling station outside Wat That Thong Buddhist temple in Bangkok on May 7, 2023, a week ahead of the May 14 general election. — AFP



JAKARTA: This handout picture taken and released on April 29, 2023 by the Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI) shows army tactical vehicles and troops to be transported by warships from a naval port in Jakarta to Labuan Bajo where the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summit will be held in May. — AFP

Myanmar crisis to dominate ASEAN leaders summit

SINGAPORE: The festering crisis in Myanmar will loom over talks between Southeast Asian leaders in Indonesia this week, as they renew calls for an end to the escalating violence. Myanmar has been in turmoil since the military putsch that ousted Aung San Suu Kyi's government in February 2021, with the junta's bloody crackdown on dissent sparking social unrest and an economic disaster.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) — long decried by critics as a toothless talking shop—has been trying to kick-start a five-point plan agreed with Myanmar two years ago after mediation attempts to end violence failed. But its efforts have stalled as the junta ignores international criticism and refuses to engage with its opponents, which include ousted lawmakers, anti-coup "People's Defence Forces" and ethnic minority armed groups. An air strike on a village in a rebel stronghold last month that reportedly killed dozens of people sparked global condemnation and worsened the junta's isolation.

Diplomats told AFP that the crisis would be a key issue during the May 9-11 summit on the Indonesian island of Flores. The 10-member regional bloc will again "strongly condemn" the air strike and demand an immediate end to the violence in its end-of-summit statement to be issued by this year's chair Indonesia, according to a draft seen by AFP.

"This would be the only way to create a conducive environment for an inclusive national dialogue to find a sustainable peaceful solution in Myanmar," the draft statement said. Myanmar remains an ASEAN member but has been barred from top-level summits over the junta's failure to implement the peace plan.

Vietnam reports record-high temperature

HANOI: Vietnam has reported a record-high temperature, with climate experts warning such extreme weather events would continue. The country's scientists have warned that global warming is exacerbating adverse weather, with the region sweltering under a heatwave in April—when neighboring countries also registered record temperatures.

A temperature of 44.1 degrees Celsius (111.38 degrees Fahrenheit) was measured in Vietnam Saturday, the National Centre for Hydro Meteorological Forecasting said, breaking the 2019 record of 43.4 degrees Celsius. Farmer Nguyen Thi Lan told AFP that temperatures in the central city of Danang had been increasingly hot, forcing workers to start earlier than ever.

'Quiet diplomacy'

Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi said Friday that her country was using "quiet diplomacy" to speak with all sides of the Myanmar conflict and spur renewed peace efforts. But former Indonesian foreign minister Marty Natalegawa said the worsening crisis posed an "existential threat" to ASEAN.

He urged the bloc to do more or risk being sidelined as other nations, such as China and individual member countries of ASEAN, take the lead in trying to resolve the situation. Natalegawa said ASEAN should "openly invite" the National Unity Government (NUG) — a shadow administration dominated by lawmakers from Suu Kyi's party which is working to overturn the coup—to their meetings to make the junta "feel the consequence of their intransigence". "We are led to believe that there is some quiet diplomacy going on, but it can't be too quiet that it becomes a deafening silence," Natalegawa told AFP.

But Singapore Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan has urged caution and "strategic patience".

"We need to make sure the actions we take collectively and individually do not make the situation worse and do not allow or encourage or enable the military to shed more blood for their own narrow parochial interests," Balakrishnan said in Australia last week. This week's ASEAN leaders summit is the first of two to be held in Indonesia this year. Jakarta's chairmanship of the bloc has raised hopes ASEAN could push for a peaceful solution, using its economic weight as well as its diplomatic experience.

ASEAN has long been criticized for its inaction but its initiatives are limited by its charter principles of consensus and non-interference. Among other issues to be discussed at the summit will be the disputed South China Sea. Several ASEAN members have partial claims to the waterway, which China claims almost entirely. Indonesian President Joko Widodo is also expected to outline a roadmap for East Timor's membership in the bloc. — AFP

"We have had to finish before 10:00 am to avoid the heat," she said. Lan said forecasters said temperatures had risen to nearly 40 degrees Celsius. "But at lunchtime, I think it was much hotter." Vietnam's weather varies from north to south, but the entire country is now entering its hottest summer months. The record temperature was measured indoors at Hoi Xuan station in northern Thanh Hoa province. It topped the previous high of 43.4 degrees Celsius, recorded in April 2019 at Huong Khe District in central Ha Tinh Province. "This is a worrying record in the context of climate change and global warming," climate change expert Nguyen Ngoc Huy told AFP from the capital Hanoi.

"I believe this record will be repeated many times," he said. "It confirms that extreme climate models are being proven to be true." Across the country, weather experts and authorities had warned the population to remain indoors during the hottest parts of the day.

Danang has asked Vietnam's industry and electricity ministries to "cooperate to effectively deal with the heat, possible drought, lack of water," according to state media. Officials have also told the city's wa-

News in Brief

Six die in DR Congo mine crash

KANANGA, DR Congo: Six people died when a diamond mine collapsed in the Democratic Republic of Congo over the weekend, officials said on Sunday. The accident took place in the Diboko area in the central Kasai province on Friday. Those killed were "unauthorized diggers who entered an area where mining is forbidden", the province's vice-governor Gaston Nkole said. Despite the mining ban, which the authorities put in place for safety reasons, informal miners have been coming to the site at night in search of diamonds. —AFP

Dutch suspects held over ATM heist

FRANKFURT: Two Dutch nationals have been arrested on suspicion of blowing up a cash machine in Germany and stealing a large sum after a car chase, German authorities said Sunday. Using explosives to carry out bank machine robberies has become increasingly common in Germany. The latest incident took place on Saturday in the centre of Bad Homburg, outside Frankfurt, according to a joint statement from police and prosecutors. Explosives were used to break open the cash machine, with the bank housing it "badly damaged due to the force of the explosion," they said. More than 150,000 euros (\$168,000) was stolen before the men made off in a car, with police in pursuit in cars and a helicopter. —AFP

Zionists repatriate Jordanian MP

JERUSALEM: Zionist entity on Sunday transferred a Jordanian member of parliament to Amman's authorities, weeks after arresting him for attempting to smuggle pistols, rifles and gold into the occupied West Bank, officials said. Imad Adwan was detained at the Zionist-administered Allenby (King Hussein) crossing between Jordan and the West Bank on April 22 with Zionist security forces allegedly finding 12 rifles and 194 pistols in his car, the Shin Bet internal security agency said. — AFP

113 migrants rescued in Mexico

MEXICO CITY: Authorities in northwest Mexico rescued 113 kidnapped migrants of different nationalities from a building along the border with the United States, the state prosecutor's office said. Thousands of migrants fleeing violence and poverty risk abduction and exploitation at the hands of criminal gangs while crossing Mexico on the way to the US border. The latest discovery in the municipality of San Luis Rio Colorado, which borders the US state of Arizona, arose from follow-up investigations by authorities who found on Friday 10 Colombian citizens presumed to have been kidnapped. — AFP

ter supply company to ensure that there are adequate "supplies of water for domestic use". At midday Saturday, Hanoi city centre was almost empty as many remained indoors to avoid the sun.

In April, Asian countries sweltered under hot conditions—posting record or near-record temperatures. The Thai meteorological department reported a record-equaling 44.6 degrees Celsius in western Tak province, while Myanmar media said a town in the country's east reported decade-highs of 43.8 degrees. While both countries typically endure a hot period before the rainy season, the intensity of the heat has exceeded previous records. Further west, the capital of Bangladesh—long dramatically impacted by climate change—recorded its highest temperature since the 1960s. At the same time, Indian weather authorities said parts of the country were experiencing temperatures roughly three to four degrees above normal. A recent report from the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warned that "every increment of global warming will intensify multiple and concurrent hazards". — AFP