

International

Myanmar must end violence, restore democracy: Indonesia

ASEAN holds crisis talks with junta chief leader Hlaing

JAKARTA: Myanmar's military must restore democracy and stop committing violence against citizens, Indonesian president Joko Widodo said after crisis talks with junta chief leader Min Aung Hlaing and Southeast Asian leaders yesterday.

The strongly worded statement followed a meeting in Jakarta of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which marked the senior Myanmar general's first foreign trip since security forces staged a coup that ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi in early February. Min Aung Hlaing has become the focus of international outrage over the coup and a subsequent crackdown on dissent that has left more than 700 dead. "The first requested commitment is for the Myanmar military to stop the use of violence and that all parties there at the same time must refrain so that tensions can be reduced," Widodo said yesterday. "The violence must be stopped and democracy, stability and peace in Myanmar must be restored."

He also called for the release of political prisoners and for a special envoy to be allowed into the country to "push for dialogue". Singapore's prime minister Lee Hsien Loong, meanwhile, called on the military to release Myanmar's ousted president, as well as democracy icon Suu Kyi who is under house arrest.

Yesterday's meeting follows mass protests which have been met by a brutal crackdown that has left blood on the streets. An estimated 250,000 people have been displaced, according to a UN envoy, with Myanmar's democratically elected top leaders in hiding or under house arrest.

Also at the weekend meeting was the Sultan of Brunei, the current chair of ASEAN, as well as leaders and foreign ministers from most of the 10-country group, including Malaysia, Cambodia,

Thailand, Vietnam, the Philippines and Laos. Small protests outside the bloc's Jakarta headquarters were dispersed by security personnel.

'Murderer-in-chief'

In Myanmar, protesters continued to take to the streets yesterday, including in northern Kachin state, where demonstrators wore blue shirts to symbolize detainees. In commercial hub Yangon, some residents staged a mock funeral for the senior general by smashing saffron-colored clay pots on the ground, symbolic of cutting ties with the dead.

The general's involvement in the Jakarta talks has angered activists, human rights groups and a shadow government of ousted Myanmar lawmakers, which was not invited to the gathering.

"Meetings that contribute to a solution to the deepening crisis in Myanmar are welcome," the latter said in a statement. "(But) meetings that exclude the people of Myanmar but include murderer-in-chief Min Aung Hlaing... are unlikely to be helpful." The lawmakers called on the junta to "stop murdering civilians", release more than 3,000 political prisoners and return power to the country's democratically elected government.

"The crisis initiated by a murderous and unrepentant Myanmar military has engulfed the country, and will cause severe aftershocks-humanitarian and more-for the entire region," rights group Amnesty International said ahead of the meeting.

'Be realistic'

There have also been calls for the regional bloc to expel Myanmar. But ASEAN generally takes a hands-off approach to members' internal affairs. Few analysts had expected major breakthroughs from the meeting, saying instead it was a chance



JAKARTA: This handout photo taken yesterday and released by the Indonesian Presidential Palace shows leaders attending the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit on the Myanmar crisis in Jakarta. —AFP

to bring Myanmar's military to the bargaining table and pave the way for a possible resolution. "We have to be realistic here. I don't think the summit is going to bear out a full-blown plan on how to get Myanmar out of the conflict," Mustafa Izzuddin, senior international affairs analyst at Solaris Strategies Singapore, said before the talks. "But rather I think it will start the conversation

and perhaps lay the parameters as to how a resolution could be found."

The crisis engulfing Myanmar has delivered a major challenge to the future of the ASEAN bloc and its consensus-driven approach. "International eyes are on (it) to see whether the regional approach that ASEAN has taken to find a resolution in Myanmar is effective," Izzuddin said. —AFP

Indonesia military: Submarine sank with 53 aboard

BALI, Indonesia: An Indonesian submarine that went missing off the coast of Bali has sunk, the navy said yesterday, dashing hopes of rescuing any of its 53 crew. The navy's chief said a search party had recovered fragments from the KRI Nanggala 402 including items from inside the vessel, whose oxygen reserves were already believed to have run out.

Warships, planes and hundreds of military personnel have been searching for the stricken vessel. Authorities had said the German-built craft was equipped with enough oxygen for only three days after losing power. That deadline passed early yesterday.

"We have raised the status from submit to sub-sunk," navy chief Yudo Margono told reporters, adding that the retrieved items could not have come from another vessel.

"(The items) would not have come outside the submarine if there was no external pressure or without damage to its torpedo launcher." Navy officials displayed several items including a piece of

its torpedo system and a bottle of grease used to lubricate a submarine's periscope.

They also found a prayer mat commonly used by Muslims. Indonesia is the world's most populous Islamic nation. Margono said the hunt for the submarine-and sailors-would continue, but warned that deep waters made the recovery effort "very risky and difficult". "We don't know about the victims' condition because we haven't found any of them. So we can't speculate," he said in response to questions about the possibility of survivors. "But with the (discovery) of these items, you can make your own conclusion."

Sudden disappearance

The submarine-one of five in Indonesia's fleet-disappeared early Wednesday during live torpedo training exercises off the Indonesian holiday island. An oil spill spotted where the submarine was thought to have submerged pointed to possible fuel-tank damage, fanning fears of a deadly disaster.

There were concerns that the submarine could have been crushed by water pressure if it sank to depths topping 700 meters (2,300 feet) — well below what it was built to withstand. The vessel was scheduled to conduct the training exercises when it asked for permission to dive. It lost contact shortly after.

small, what will I tell his wife?" GTB has run out of beds and, like all hospitals in Delhi, is fighting to get oxygen.

It has said it is doing the best it can in a crisis, and medical staff are working without days off. India's surge has seen it add around 350,000 cases and 2,600 deaths a day, and the healthcare system has been pushed to breaking point. Narayan's death at the hospital doors is common and it is unlikely to be counted in official figures-his body was taken away without any formal admission.

The security guard at the GTB door turned away patients, telling panicked relatives the wards were full. Some stayed in line, others hailed auto-rickshaws to continue the desperate hunt for a bed.

Exhausted seventeen-year-old Mohan Sharma stood with his 65-year-old grandfather, giving the old man water, supporting him as he coughed and tenderly putting his oxygen mask on. His father had died of coronavirus in the same queue less than 24 hours earlier. "He was gasping for air, we removed his face mask and he was crying and saying 'save me, please save me'."

"But I could do nothing. I just watched him die", said Sharma. With no time to grieve, he had to quickly move on to helping his grandfather.

The family managed to find a bed for him but the grandfather was overwhelmed by the grim conditions. "There were three dead bodies next to him and he panicked and said he would not survive. So I took him

September. "And he has approved the addition of some long range bombers to be deployed to the region. Two of those B-52s have arrived in the region," Kirby said.

The Stratofortress bombers are usually based in Qatar, where the US military has an important base. Kirby did not dismiss the idea that further reinforcements could be sent to ensure the smooth and safe removal of some 2,500 US troops and another 16,000 civilians supporting the US operation in Afghanistan. There are also another 7,000 NATO troops in the country, who also depend on the United States for material and security support.

"I think it's reasonable to assume, as I've said before, that there could be temporary additional force protection measures and enablers that we would require to make sure that this drawdown goes smoothly and safely for our men and women," Kirby told reporters. —AFP



DENPASAR: Indonesian military chief Hadi Tjahjanto (center) speaks during a press conference in Denpasar yesterday as search operations continued off the coast of Bali for the Navy's KRI Nanggala (402) submarine that went missing on April 21 during a training exercise. —AFP

Authorities have not offered possible explanations for the submarine's sudden disappearance or commented on questions about whether the decades-old vessel was overloaded. The military has said the submarine, delivered to Indonesia in 1981, was seaworthy. —AFP



NEW DELHI: Relatives transport a COVID-19 patient on a stretcher to a hospital in New Delhi yesterday. —AFP

outside and he's resting now," said Sharma.

People who have been inside described crowded hallways, with beds and stretchers occupied by two or three people. Sharma's grandfather's oxygen cylinder was almost empty, with no guarantee that it would be replaced.

He also needed to check on his mother, who was nursing a coronavirus-positive grandmother at home. "I have seen three dead bodies in six minutes," said Ravi Kumar, who managed to get his 80-year-old grandfather admitted after waiting outside the hospital all night. —AFP



This handout photograph shows US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (center right) walks with Afghanistan's Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammad Hanif Atmar (center left), in Kabul on April 15. —AFP

News in brief

Avalanche kills 8 Indians on border

NEW DELHI: At least eight workers were killed and hundreds were rescued after an avalanche struck a remote Himalayan region near the China border in northern India, officials said yesterday. Six people were in critical condition in hospital after authorities used helicopters to retrieve trapped workers in Chamoli district of Uttarakhand state. The avalanche is believed to have been triggered by glacier collapse in the Himalayas late Friday, two months after a devastating glacial burst in the same region left more than 200 dead. The Chamoli district chief said rescue and relief operations were continuing in the remote Niti Valley, close to the China border. —AFP

Sri Lanka Easter attacks: One arrested

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka's police arrested a top Muslim legislator yesterday in connection with the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks that killed 279 people, as pressure mounted to speed up the investigation. Detectives took Rishad Bathiudeen, leader of the All Ceylon Makkal Party (ACMP) and a former minister, into custody under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), police spokesman Ajith Rohana said. Bathiudeen and his brother Riyaj were arrested in pre-dawn raids on their homes in Colombo. "They were arrested under the PTA based on circumstantial and scientific evidence that they had connections with the suicide bombers who carried out the attacks," Rohana said in a statement. —AFP

French volunteers leave cave

TARASCON-SUR-ARIEGE, France: A group of 15 French volunteers yesterday left a cave where they had stayed for 40 days, in an experiment probing the limits of human adaptability to isolation. Dazzled by the light and with pale faces but otherwise healthy, the group led by French-Swiss explorer Christian Clot emerged at around 10.30 am (0830 GMT) from the Lombrives cave in Ariege, southwest France. The underground isolation experiment saw the subjects, aged between 27 and 50, give up watches, phones and natural light, exchanging modern comforts for a cave system with a constant 12 Celsius (54 Fahrenheit) temperature and 95 percent humidity. Members had to generate their own electricity with a pedal bike and draw water from a well 45 meters below the earth. —AFP

Singapore names new FM

SINGAPORE: A top Singapore official who has been tipped as a future premier was named the new finance minister Friday, as the city-state overhauls its leadership succession plans following a setback. Lawrence Wong, currently education minister, was picked as the replacement for Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat in a major cabinet reshuffle. Heng was widely seen as the prime minister in waiting until he gave up his claim to the job this month in a shock move that upended the tightly-controlled country's carefully planned power transfer. The key finance portfolio is sometimes seen as a stepping stone to the premiership, although analysts said it was too early to tell who will take over from Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. —AFP

Death, despair at doors of stricken Delhi hospital

NEW DELHI: Barely breathing, Shyam Narayan arrived at the New Delhi hospital in a red rickshaw, his feet hanging over the side, but it soon became clear to his desperate family that the overwhelmed staff could not help him. He was just the latest victim of the coronavirus wave battering India, where thousands of afflicted are turning up at hospitals only to find no beds and a battle for oxygen and life-saving drugs. At Guru Teg Bahadur (GTB) hospital in northeast Delhi, Narayan and his family were part of a steady stream of ambulances, rickshaws and other vehicles bringing COVID-19 patients for treatment, waiting for beds inside already occupied by up to three people. He didn't make it that far: a stretcher carrying his lifeless body was wheeled out just a few minutes after he was taken through the doors.

Gasping for air

The Narayan family had tried all night to find an oxygen bed for him. But they were repeatedly turned away by hospitals, said brother Ram. "My brother has five children and the youngest one is so

US positions carrier, bombers to back Afghanistan pullout

WASHINGTON: The Pentagon has deployed B-52 bombers to the Middle East and has prolonged the presence of an aircraft carrier in the region to support the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, spokesman John Kirby said Friday. US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin decided to keep the USS Eisenhower in the US Central Command region for an extended period, in the wake of President Joe Biden's decision to withdraw all US forces from Afghanistan by