Australia's Wong presses Myanmar generals to change tack ahead of Laos summits

Reuters – Australia's foreign minister urged Myanmar's military rulers on Saturday to take a different path and end an intensifying civil war, as top diplomats of world powers gathered in Laos ahead of two summits seeking to tackle key global issues.

Penny Wong said Australia was deeply concerned about the conflict in Myanmar since the generals seized power in a 2021 coup and urged them to abide by their commitment to follow a five-point consensus peace plan by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

"We see the instability, the insecurity, the deaths, the pain that is being caused by the conflict," Wong told reporters ahead of Saturday's East Asia Summit and security-focused ASEAN Regional Forum, attended by Russia, the United States, China, Japan, Britain and others.

"Fundamentally, my message from Australia to the regime is, this is not sustainable for you or for your people. And we would urge them to take a different path and to reflect the five-point consensus that ASEAN has put in place."

The conflict pits Myanmar's well-equipped military against a loose alliance of ethnic minority rebel groups and an armed resistance movement that has been gaining ground and testing the junta's ability to govern.

An estimated 2.6 million people have been displaced by fighting. The junta has been condemned for excessive force in its air strikes on civilian areas and accused of atrocities, which it has dismissed as Western disinformation.

The military government has largely ignored the ASEAN-promoted peace effort. The 10-member bloc, of which Myanmar is a member, has hit a wall as all sides refuse to enter into dialogue.

CONCERN OVER DANGEROUS ACTIONS

The Myanmar civil war is expected to be addressed by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who arrived in Laos early Saturday and will meet ASEAN counterparts and hold bilateral talks with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi.

Blinken will, according to a statement, reiterate calls for following international law in the South China Sea, where the United States has criticised what it sees as repeated aggression by Beijing's coastguard against vessels of defence ally the Philippines.

The Philippines and China have clashed repeatedly at sea and rhetorically this past year over incidents near two disputed shoals within Manila's exclusive economic zone (EEZ), far from the Chinese mainland, causing regional concern about an escalation in waters through which about $3 trillion of annual trade passes.

The Philippines this week said it had reached an arrangement with China allowing Manila's vessels to reach troops stationed on a navy ship that was intentionally run aground in 1999 at the Second Thomas Shoal, a presence that has angered China for years.

The Philippines said it had completed a personnel rotation and resupply mission unimpeded at the shoal on Saturday with "no untoward incidents reported".

Australia's Wong said it was important that EEZs in the South China Sea were secure, that international waterways remained accessible and that tensions were de-escalated.

“We are very concerned about any actions which are destabilising, which are dangerous and which are contrary to international law,” Wong said.

Reuters