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Marles prepares to visit Ukraine as Labor MPs call for embassy reopening



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Defence Minister Richard Marles is preparing to travel to Ukraine in a show of support aimed at combating claims of faltering Australian support for Ukraine's war against Russia.

Marles is preparing for his visit as Labor MPs voice their growing frustration with the government's refusal to reopen the Australian embassy in Kyiv since it was evacuated ahead of Russia's invasion on February 24, 2022.



A visit by the deputy prime minister would be welcomed by the Ukrainian government which has grown despondent at Australia's level of military support. ALEX ELLINGHAUSEN

His trip, expected in the near future, has not been publicly announced and is still being planned.

Marles would be the first government minister to visit Ukraine since Prime Minister Anthony Albanese travelled to Kyiv in July 2022 and met with President Volodymyr Zelensky.

A visit by the deputy prime minister, who has long expressed interest in travelling to Ukraine, would be warmly welcomed by the Ukrainian government and local advocates who have grown increasingly despondent at Australia's level of military support.

After rejecting repeated pleas to send a batch of Hawkei protected mobility vehicles to Ukraine last year, the government recently declined a Ukrainian request to gain access to the army's retired fleet of Taipan MRH-90 helicopters.



Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese tours damaged residential areas in Irpin on the outskirts of Kyiv, Ukraine, Sunday, July 3, 2022. LUKAS COCH

Ukraine has also yet to receive a response to its request for a shipment of Australian coal to help with its energy needs.

After previously boasting that Australia was the largest non-NATO contributor to the Ukrainian war effort, Australia now ranks among the lowest of all per capita donor countries as a proportion of gross domestic product.

With a \$92 billion military aid package stalled in the US Congress, the top US general in Europe, Christopher Cavoli, this week warned that Ukraine could soon run out of artillery shells and air defence interceptors, leaving the nation vulnerable to defeat.

Marles is expected to use his trip to announce details of Australia's contribution to the Ukraine "drone coalition", an international initiative to boost the nation's drone supplies led by the United Kingdom and Latvia.

Marles said joining the drone coalition was a "really important opportunity for us to continue making our contribution to the effort to have Ukraine stay the course and be able to resolve this conflict on its terms" during a visit by top UK officials last month.

Australia has provided \$780 million in military assistance to Ukraine since the war began in

February 2022, including a \$50 million grant announced in February.

Planning for high-level visits to Ukraine has been complicated by the fact that Australia does not have a diplomatic presence in Kyiv.

Over 60 nations have re-established their Ukrainian embassies since Russia's invasion – including the United States, Japan, UK and Canada.

Yet Australian diplomats, including new ambassador Paul Lehmann, remain based in the Polish capital of Warsaw.

“Ukrainians are fighting to preserve their democracy and I know it would mean a great deal to them for us to reopen the embassy,” Labor Senator Deborah O’Neill said.

“The plight of Ukraine has been displaced in the public consciousness by the horrors of the Middle East, and anything we can do to support them the better.”

As well as an ambassador based in Kyiv, O’Neill said it was important to have an Australian defence attaché in the Ukrainian capital to advise on how Australia can best contribute to the war effort.

Labor MP Julian Hill said: “It’s increasingly perplexing why Australia’s ambassador to Ukraine hasn’t returned to Kyiv, along with our defence attaché and liaison on the ground.



One of the Bushmaster vehicles Australia donated to Ukraine in the first year of the war. KATE GERAGHTY

“Despite questions, we have had no good reasons from DFAT [the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade] or the Department of Defence about why this hasn’t happened.

“Personally, I would like to see the embassy reopen as we are out of step with our allies and partners.”

O’Neill and Hill hail from Labor’s right and left factions respectively, reflecting concern across the party about the issue.

The Australian Federation of Ukrainian Organisations and the federal opposition have been urging the government to reopen the embassy in Kyiv, saying a failure to do so sends a poor signal about the nation’s commitment to Ukraine.

DFAT officials said during the most recent Senate estimates hearings that the situation in Ukraine was too unpredictable and risky for an Australian embassy to return to the country.

“The risks to personnel there are high,” DFAT Secretary Jan Adams said.

“The situation remains unpredictable and quite difficult to mitigate. The embassy is operating remotely out of Warsaw; they’re able to manage Australia’s interests quite effectively from there.”

Ukrainian ambassador to Australia Vasyl Myroshnychenko publicly invited Foreign Minister Penny Wong to visit Ukraine last July, but the offer has not been taken up.

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