

# WORLD

## German parliament OKs big increase in spending

BERLIN — Germany's parliament approved plans for a massive spending surge on Tuesday, throwing off decades of fiscal conservatism in hopes of reviving economic growth and scaling up military spending for a new era of European collective defense.

The approval in the Bundestag hands conservative leader Friedrich Merz a huge boost, giving the chancellor-in-waiting a windfall of hundreds of billions of euros to ramp up investment after two years of contraction in Europe's largest economy.

Germany and other European nations have been under pressure to shore up their defenses in the face of shifts in US policy, which European leaders fear could leave the continent exposed.

Merz's conservatives and Social Democrats, or SPD, who are in talks to form a centrist coalition after last month's election, want to create a 500 billion euro (\$546 billion) fund for infrastructure and to ease constitutionally enshrined borrowing rules to allow higher spending on defense.

"We have for at least a decade felt a false sense of security," Merz told lawmakers ahead of the vote.

"The decision we are taking today on defense readiness ... can be nothing less than the first major step toward a new European defense community," he said.

The legislation still has to go on Friday to the Bundesrat upper house but the main hurdle to passage there appeared to fall on Monday when the Bavarian Free Voters agreed to back the plans.

The conservatives and SPD wanted to pass the legislation through the outgoing parliament for fear it could be blocked by an enlarged contingent of far-right and far-left lawmakers in the next Bundestag starting March 25. Merz has justified the tight timetable with the rapidly changing geopolitical situation.

"In our view, this is a historic fiscal regime shift, arguably the largest since German reunification," said Robin Winkler, Chief German Economist at Deutsche Bank Research.

"It's excellent news because it sends a very clear message, very clear message also to Europe that Germany is determined to invest

massively in defense," said EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen.

NATO chief Mark Rutte wrote on X that "this sends a powerful message of leadership and commitment to our shared security".

And French President Emmanuel Macron on a visit to Berlin congratulated Chancellor Olaf Scholz "on the historic vote of the Bundestag which is good news for Germany and good news for Europe".

The reforms mark a major roll-back of the so-called debt brake imposed after the 2008 global financial crisis but have been criticized by many as outdated and putting Germany into a fiscal straitjacket.

### Shift in policy

But critics, including within his own party, accuse Merz of "voter fraud" for promising spending restraint during the election campaign only to announce the shift in fiscal policy just days after winning.

"The politician's greatest asset is credibility," said Tino Chrupalla, co-leader of the far-right Alternative for Germany, or AfD, during the debate.

"With these embarrassing actions, Mr Merz, you have already completely squandered yours. The voters feel betrayed by you, and rightly so."

Before the vote, Bernd Baumann of the AfD accused Merz of ignoring the will of voters by seeking to push the vote through the outgoing parliament.

Lars Klingbeil of the SPD said that the new spending aimed to "maintain peace in Europe" but also "invest in advancing the economy and strengthening social cohesion" and therefore help counter "division and polarization".

Economists caution that further reforms are needed, for example, to cut bureaucracy, to ensure sustainable growth.

Fitch Ratings agency also warned on Tuesday that Germany's coveted AAA rating could come under pressure in the longer run if its vast spending effort is not offset by consolidation measures, or fails to produce a lasting improvement in economic growth.

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Friedrich Merz, Germany's chancellor-in-waiting, casts his vote to set up a huge infrastructure fund, in Berlin, on Tuesday. MICHAEL KAPPELER/REUTERS

## Dastardly act



People gather on top of debris of buildings at the scene of an explosion near the Presidential Palace, also known as Villa Somalia, in the Hamar Jajab district of Mogadishu, Somalia, on Tuesday. The Information Ministry called the attack a "cowardly act of desperation". The statement did not provide an official death toll. FEISAL OMAR / REUTERS

# US move 'attempt to gain political capital'

## Recent airstrikes on Houthis will only escalate regional tensions, experts say

By YANG RAN

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The recent US airstrikes on the Houthi forces aim to align with Israel in targeting anti-Israeli groups in the Middle East and to deter Iran, experts said, adding that the Donald Trump administration is also using these intensified attacks to gain political capital.

However, experts warn these strikes may not achieve their intended outcomes and could instead escalate regional tensions.

Since Trump announced large-scale airstrikes on Houthi forces in Yemen on Saturday, US military operations in Yemen have continued for five days, targeting military sites and homes. US media describe this as the most significant military action since Trump's second term began.

According to a statement from the Houthi-run health authority on Sunday, the death toll from the US airstrikes over the past days has increased to 53, including five children and two women.

The US said the operation aims to secure Red Sea shipping lanes threatened by Houthi attacks. The Houthi group in Yemen has launched attacks against what it calls Israel-bound ships or those affiliated with Israel in and around the Red Sea since November 2023, demanding an end to its military actions in Gaza.

A pause in Houthi assaults followed a January cease-fire between Israel and Hamas. However, as negotiations for a second-phase Gaza cease-fire stalled and aid remained blocked, the Houthis announced on March 11 that they would resume attacks on "Israel-

linked" ships across the Red Sea, Arabian Sea, Gulf of Aden and Bab al-Mandab Strait until the crossings of the Gaza Strip are reopened and aid allowed in.

Shu Meng, an assistant professor at Shanghai International Studies University's Middle East Studies Institute, noted that Trump's military action against the Houthi forces was a calculated move, not a sudden decision.

"March's instability in the Red Sea gave Trump a suitable excuse for military actions, as Houthi attacks on US and Israeli merchant ships have long disrupted international trade in the region," she said.

"Beyond protecting merchant ships, the US also has several deeper strategic goals, including reinforcing support for Israel, coordinating with Israel to reshape the Middle East and curbing Iran's influence. Also, targeting the Houthis serves as a warning to Iran."

### Different approach

"Domestically, with the Houthis being active during Joe Biden's presidency, Trump wants to showcase a different approach, emphasizing his decisiveness to gain strategic and political advantages," Shu said.

Days after the US launched its extensive military operation against Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen, Israel carried out deadly bombardments across the Gaza Strip early on Tuesday, killing almost a thousand people in two days.

Niu Xinchun, executive director of the China-Arab Research Institute of Ningxia University, pointed out that the US essentially executed a preemptive strike.

"The US and Israel coordinate

their actions, with the US handling the Houthis in the Red Sea, with Israel focusing on Gaza, a strategy in place for over a year," Niu explained. "The Red Sea and Gaza issues are closely interconnected. With conflict in Gaza and US actions against the Houthis, both regions are likely to remain in conflict for some time."

US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said the airstrikes would continue until Houthi attacks on US ships and drones cease. However, the Houthis responded on Wednesday by targeting the USS *Harry S. Truman* aircraft carrier in the Red Sea for the fourth time in the past 72 hours.

Experts warn the US strikes may not meet their objectives. Shu Meng noted that the Houthis have strong local support in Yemen. "Relying solely on military strikes, especially targeting leaders, is unlikely to be effective and could provoke more frequent retaliatory attacks on merchant ships, worsening the Red Sea situation."

Niu echoed this, noting that while the US aims to deliver "devastating strikes" to weaken the Houthis' military strength, history shows that airstrikes alone are insufficient. "Devastating strikes require both air and ground forces, but the US is unlikely to commit ground troops. Thus, even with prolonged strikes and expanded targets, achieving US objectives is unlikely."

Shu said the complex issues in the Red Sea region stem from intertwined problems that cannot be solved by military means alone. "The unilateral actions of the US and Israel lack broad international support, potentially exacerbating tensions and complicating the situation," she said.

Xinhua contributed to this story.

## Washington urged to end blockade on Havana

By ZHOU JIN

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China has blasted the United States for making "forced labor" an excuse for suppressing dissidence, urging Washington to stop the blockade and sanctions on Cuba in any name.

Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning made the remarks on Wednesday after the US Secretary of State Marco Rubio last month announced the expansion of a visa restriction policy to target Cuban officials believed to be tied to a labor program that sends Cuban workers overseas, particularly healthcare workers.

The expanded restrictions target individuals and immediate family members of individuals believed to be responsible for the program, which Rubio described as "forced labor".

Caribbean Community foreign ministers expressed concerns over the decision in a meeting with US Special Envoy for Latin America Mauricio Claver-Carone earlier this month.

Several leaders of the Caribbean states criticized the US move, with several prime ministers declaring they would rather forfeit their access to US soil than compromise healthcare for their citizens.

### 'Perfect excuse'

"The so-called forced labor has been used as a perfect excuse and tool for Washington to pursue hegemony and attack dissenting views," Mao told a daily news conference.

Relevant measures of the US are an extension and escalation of its over 60 years of sanctions and blockade on Cuba, she said.

Mao cited Cuba's Director of the Central Medical Cooperation Unit Michael Cabrera Laza as saying that in the past 60 years, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, Cuba sent over 600,000 medical personnel to over 60 countries, provided medical services for over 230 million people, and performed over 17 million surgeries, which saved the lives of more than 12 million people.

Cuba's global medical missions and their services are welcomed by governments and people of Caribbean states, Mao said.

China opposes coercive diplomacy, the spokeswoman said, urging Washington to remove Cuba from the list of state sponsors of terrorism.

The US should do more to improve its ties with Cuba and offer real assistance to the Caribbean states, she added.

### Briefly

#### MEXICO

### Capital city bans violent bullfighting

Mexico City lawmakers on Tuesday voted overwhelmingly to ban violent bullfighting, triggering outrage from aficionados and celebration from animal rights advocates. The legislation, approved by a 61-1 vote, prohibits the killing of bulls and the use of sharp objects that could injure the animals. It also sets time limits on how long bulls can be in the ring, all part of an initiative dubbed bullfighting without violence. The decision sparked angry protests from bullfighting supporters and matadors. Bullfighting has long been considered a tradition and a pastime in Latin America, but has come under criticism for animal cruelty because bulls are often killed at the end of the fight.

#### PAKISTAN

### Leader calls for unity after surge in attacks

Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif called on Tuesday on the country's political leadership to unite in its resolve to combat militants with "the full force of the state" following a surge in deadly violence. Separatists in Balochistan last week hijacked a train and killed 26 hostages before security forces shot dead all 33 attackers in one of the worst bloodsheds in recent months that drew condemnation.

## Trump releases JFK assassination files

WASHINGTON — US President Donald Trump released material related to the 1963 assassination of former president John F. Kennedy on Tuesday, seeking to honor his campaign promise to provide more transparency about the shock event in Texas.

An initial tranche of electronic copies of papers flooded into the National Archives website in the evening with a total of more than 80,000 expected to be published after the Justice Department lawyers spent hours scouring them.

The release is nonetheless likely to intrigue people who have long been fascinated with a dramatic period in history, with the assassination and with Kennedy himself.

Larry J. Sabato, director of the University of Virginia Center for Politics and author of *The Kennedy Half-Century*, said it will take time to fully review the records.

"We have a lot of work to do for a long time to come, and people just have to accept that," he said.

Many of the files reflected the work by investigators to learn more about assassin Lee Harvey Oswald's time in then Soviet Union and track his movements in the months leading up to Kennedy's assassination in Dallas on Nov 22, 1963.

An initial review of the papers did not show deviations from the central narrative.

Some of the documents from previous releases have offered details on the way intelligence services operated at the time, including CIA cables and memos discussing visits by Oswald to the Soviet Union and Cuban embassies during a trip to Mexico City just weeks before the assassination.

Trump's secretary of health and human services, Robert F. Kennedy Jr, the son of Robert Kennedy and nephew of John F. Kennedy, has said he believes the Central Intelligence Agency was involved in his uncle's death, an allegation the agency has described as baseless.

Fredrik Logevall, a Harvard his-

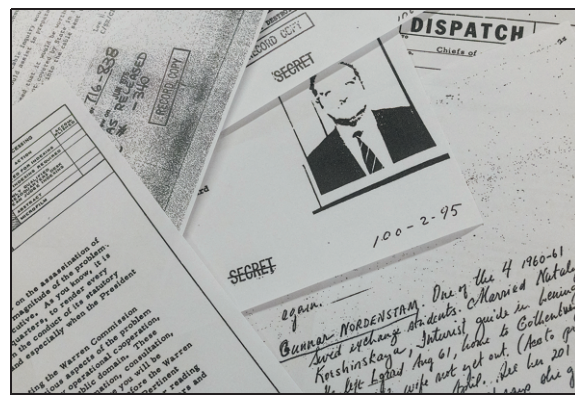
tory professor whose books include *JFK: Coming of Age in the American Century 1917-56*, said in an email the new documents may help fill in the picture.

"It's valuable to get all the documentation out, ideally in unredacted form. But I don't expect dramatic new revelations that alter in some fundamental way our grasp of the event," he said.

Trump signed an order shortly after taking office in January related to the release of documents, prompting the Federal Bureau of Investigation to find thousands of new documents.

In the scramble to comply with Trump's order, the US Justice Department ordered some of its lawyers who handle sensitive national security matters to urgently review records from the assassination, according to a Monday evening email seen by Reuters.

"President Trump is ushering in a new era of maximum transparency," Director of National Intelli-



Documents are displayed after they were released following an order from US President Donald Trump, in Washington DC, on Tuesday. MICHAEL KAPPELER/REUTERS

gence Tulsi Gabbard said in a post on X.

Alice L. George, a historian whose books, including *The Assassination of John F. Kennedy*, explore the modern US, said US people's curiosity about assassinations and questions about government transparency add "to a sense

that there must be important evidence hidden away in these files".

But she said government records were unlikely to resolve questions people still have. "I think there may continue to be more record releases," she said.

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