

HD **Australia shares fall as weak **China** trade data hits miners**

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* S&P/ASX 200 slips from 5-1/2-year high set Friday

* Disappointing **Chinese** export data routs resource stocks

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* Defensives like Cochlear, Wesfarmers buck market weakness (Adds analysis, quotes, stocks on the move)

SYDNEY, March 10 (Reuters) - Australian shares fell nearly 1 percent on Monday, slipping from a 5-1/2-year high touched in the previous session, after disappointing **Chinese** trade data hit metals markets and sent resource stocks tumbling.

Chinese exports unexpectedly tumbled 18.1 percent in February from a year earlier, data released at the weekend showed, swinging the trade balance into deficit and adding to fears of a slowdown in the world's second-largest economy.

Copper fell to its lowest level in more than seven months on concerns about slower growth in **China**, while **gold** edged lower for a second straight session on Monday after strong U.S. jobs data eased fears of an economic slowdown in the United States.

Mt Gibson **Iron** Ltd lost 5.3 percent and Atlas **Iron** Ltd plunged 8.5 percent. Fortescue Metals Group Ltd tumbled 10 percent and fellow steel producer Arrium Ltd dropped 7.2 percent.

Index heavyweights Rio Tinto Ltd and BHP Billiton Ltd dropped 4.6 percent and 3.2 percent, respectively.

"That was pretty bad data out of the weekend," said Kara Ordway, market maker and trader at City Index, adding that trade would remain cautious over the next couple of sessions in the wake of the disappointing numbers.

"But it might be an anomaly, only time will tell, other numbers we've had for the region have been fairly stable and I think the outlook for the region has been generally okay."

The S&P/ASX 200 index fell 0.9 percent or 47.6 points to 5,414.7 by 0108 GMT. The benchmark rose 1.1 percent last week.

A few defensive-sector stocks bucked the downdraft. Consumer retail staple Woolworths Ltd added 0.4 percent and bionic ear maker Cochlear Ltd edged 0.1 percent higher.

Wesfarmers Ltd rose 0.2 percent after the retailer said it plans to sell its insurance broking business via an initial public offering worth around A\$1.12 **billion**.

Elsewhere, Leighton Holdings Ltd soared 11 percent to a one-year high of A\$23.12. Germany's Hochtief AG said it is seeking to boost its majority **stake** to 74 percent in Leighton, Australia's biggest building **company**, a deal that would be valued at A\$1.155 **billion**.

Liquefied Natural Gas Ltd bounced 12.2 percent to a near two-year high of A\$0.48 after the **company** said it is close to receiving approval from the U.S. Federal **Energy** Regulatory Commission for its \$3.5 **billion** terminal venture in Louisiana.

New Zealand's benchmark NZX 50 index slipped 0.2 percent or 10.1 points to 5,115.5. (Reporting by Thuy Ong; Editing by Chris Gallagher)

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CO wsfrm : Wesfarmers Ltd

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