

N Korea cuts off military talks with US

AFP, Seoul

North Korea on Wednesday cut off its dialogue channel with the US military while issuing a warning to Japan over a satellite launch as tension mounted on the Korean peninsula.

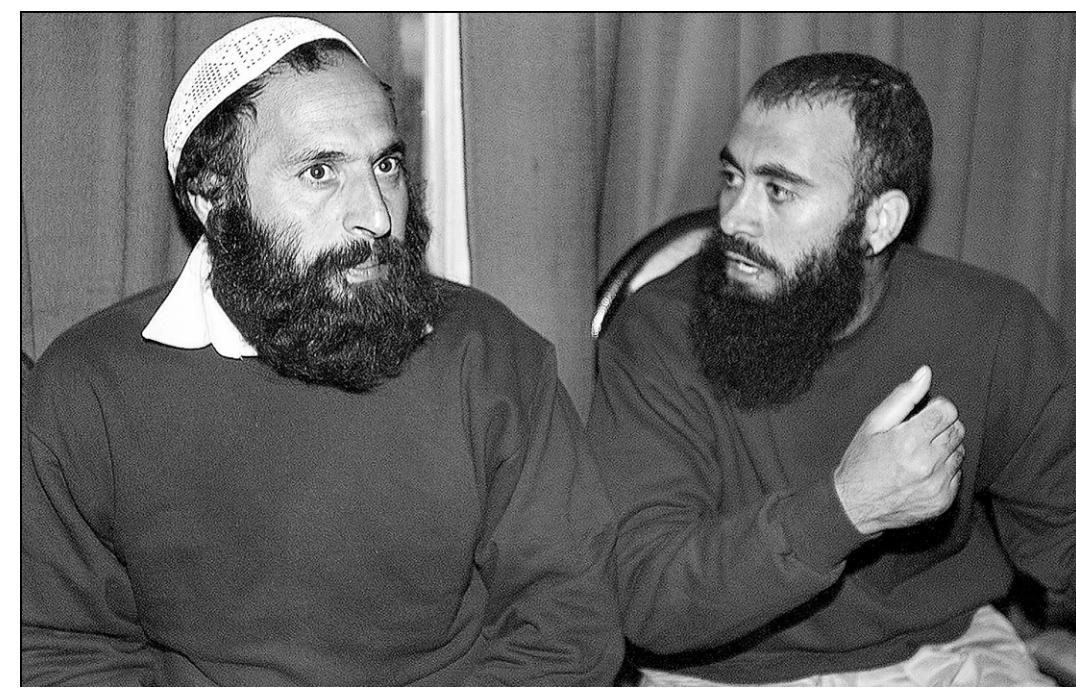
The North pulled out of regular meetings with the US-led United Nations Command and said it could be forced to take another "measure" to protest a massive US-South Korean military drill it regards as a nuclear war exercise, the North's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) said.

Ri Chan-Bok, North Korea's chief delegate to the general's talks, the highest-level meetings between the two sides, said the North suspended contacts between liaison officers at the border truce village of Panmunjom.

"(Ri) warned ... (the North Korean army) will have no option but to take a new important measure as regards the armistice agreement for its self-defence," the agency said, accusing the United States of raising tensions here.

It did not specify what measure it could take as regards the armistice agreement signed at the end of the Korean War of 1950-1953 and aimed at preventing an escalation in military tensions and avoiding armed clashes.

There was no immediate comment from the UNC, which said it may release a statement later.



Two Afghan Taliban, who were arrested after the fall of the Taliban regime and taken into custody at the US detention centre at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, talk in Kabul on Tuesday before going back to Kandahar province after their release. A group of 18 Afghans released from the US detention centre, told how they were kept in tiny cages and subjected to interrogations for more than a year to prove their innocence.

7 killed in Taliban attack in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

Seven people were killed in heavy fighting in northwestern Afghanistan following an assault by supporters of the ousted hard-line Taliban militia, officials said Wednesday.

The fighting, which has also been blamed on an ethnic attack by a powerful local commander, took place Monday in Baghdis province, close to the border with Turkmenistan, Baghdis governor

Gul Mohammad Arifi said.

"A group of 100 to 150 attacked one of our posts in Bala Murghab district on the Turkmen border, we arrested eight of them and the rest escaped to the mountains," Arifi told AFP.

"According to information we have extracted from the people we have arrested, they were given money and instructions by Mullah Broder, a high-ranking Taliban official."

Arifi said three government

soldiers were killed in the fighting while another two drowned during a skirmish in a river.

"Two Taliban were also killed, their bodies are still lying in the battlefield," he said.

But according to the Pakistan-based Afghan Islamic Press agency (AIP), the fighting was a racial attack against local Pashtun people by supporters of Ismail Khan, the powerful ethnic Tajik leader of nearby Herat province.

India tests N-capable missile

Pakistan retaliates with Abadi testfire

AFP, New Delhi

India on Wednesday test-fired a nuclear-capable surface-to-surface missile from a test range in the east of the country, defence ministry sources said.

The sources said the Prithvi missile, which can carry a one-tonne warhead a distance of 150 kilometres (93 miles) was launched at 11:30 am (0600 GMT) from the range in Orissa state.

The missile has a minimum range of 40 kilometres (25 miles).

The locally-built 8.5-metre (28-foot) long missile was launched from a mobile launcher, said sources, who described the test as a success.

The shorter-range Prithvi, which is being developed for use by the army, has so far been tested 16 times since its first trial on February 22, 1998.

Prithvi's launch took Indian military analysts by surprise as

such an exercise was not expected during the Iraq war.

"It has nothing to do with the war but the timing is a bit unusual," a senior military official, who asked to remain anonymous, commented after the test.

Indian military scientists abandoned a planned Prithvi test twice in December last year because of unspecified technical glitches in the missile's sub-systems.

Prithvi, which means Earth, is a tactical surface-to-surface missile and has on-board computers and an advanced navigation and guidance system.

The navy and airforce versions of Prithvi have an extended range of 250 kilometres (155 miles) with a 500-kilogram (1,100-pound) warhead but the Indian navy plans to add another 100 kilometres to the range.

The missile can be tipped with conventional incendiary and fragmentation munitions or can



This file photo shows an Indian Prithvi surface-to-surface missile with nuclear capability. India on Wednesday test fired the missile from a test range in the east of the country.

carry a nuclear warhead, officials said.

India, which conducted a series of nuclear tests in 1998, is also developing a series of ballistic missiles.

Meanwhile, Pakistan on Wednesday test-fired a short-range missile, coinciding with a missile test by India, a foreign ministry spokesman said.

It was not immediately known if the Pakistani missile test followed or preceded the launch of India's Prithvi missile.

"We have conducted a successful Abadi missile test today and we had given prior information to all our neighbours about the test," spokesman Aziz Ahmed Khan told AFP.

"The missile test by India came as a surprise," Khan said.

The Abadi surface-to-surface missile has a range of up to 200 kilometres (125 miles) and is capable of carrying a nuclear warhead,

an official source said.

India test-fired a nuclear-capable surface-to-surface missile with a range of 150 kilometres (93 miles) from a test range in the eastern range of Orissa at 11:30 am (0600 GMT) Wednesday.

The Indian missile has a minimum range of 40 kilometres (25 miles). The locally-built 8.5-metre (28-foot) long missile was launched from a mobile launcher, said sources, who described the test as a success.

Pakistani officials said Islamabad had informed India and other neighbouring states about the test but said the Indian missile was launched without any prior notice.

"There was no prior information given by India to Pakistan about the test," a senior government official told AFP.

Pakistan conducted an Abadi (Hafiz II) missile test in May last year.

Killer pneumonia claims 31 in China

AFP, Beijing

Chinese authorities on Wednesday reported 31 deaths from an unusual form of pneumonia which experts fear could be linked to an ongoing worldwide outbreak of a mysterious respiratory disease.

As Chinese state media reported the deaths from a wave of atypical pneumonia which climaxed in February, Singapore reported its first fatality from a disease now known as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS).

It is strongly suspected that the earlier outbreak in southern China is the source of the current SARS problem which came to light when a US businessman died on March 13 in Hong Kong after travelling to China and Vietnam.

Following the death in Singapore, the number of patients officially listed as SARS fatalities has risen to 18, including 10 in

Hong Kong, four in Vietnam and three in Canada.

The deaths in China include 24 from the southern metropolis of Guangzhou, just north of Hong Kong, and seven others in a number of other cities, the Guangzhou Daily said.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has yet to determine if the outbreak in China was in fact the first eruption of SARS.

A total of 680 cases were reported by late February in Guangzhou, with deaths reaching 24, the Guangzhou Daily said.

The paper said atypical pneumonia emerged in the city of Foshan on November 16 last year. Subsequently, it spread to the cities of Heyuan, Zhongshan, Jiangmen, Shenzhen and Zhaoqing, all in the province of Guangdong, according to the paper, with seven deaths reported.

Pandya, who was home minister from 1998 until 2001, belonged to India's ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which also holds power in New Delhi.

BJP president Venkaiah Naidu in New Delhi said Pandya was out

Ex-Gujarat minister shot dead

AFP, Ahmedabad

A former home minister of India's Gujarat state was shot dead Wednesday, sparking a security alert in the region which saw sweeping Hindu-Muslim riots last year, police said.

Police could not immediately attribute a motive for the killing of ex-minister Haren Pandya, nor say how many people carried out the shooting.

Pandya, who was home minister from 1998 until 2001, belonged to India's ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which also holds power in New Delhi.

Police, however, said Pandya was murdered in his car while on his way home from a park where he had taken a morning walk.

"He was shot while he was driving. Since nobody saw the incident, it is difficult to say how it happened," said Ahmedabad Police Commissioner K. R. Kaushik. "It is also difficult to guess what was the reason behind the assassination," he added.

Star Television said at least two gunmen were involved in the attack.

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and his deputy Lal Krishna Advani, who returned overnight from the Kashmir site of a massacre 24 Hindus, were set to visit Ahmedabad later Wednesday, Star added.



Firefighter extinguishes a fire after a bomb exploded in an oil tanker in Jammu on Wednesday. The bomb, planted inside the engine of the tanker which was parked outside an oil depot in the disputed Kashmir's winter capital, killed one person and injured five.

15 killed in attack ahead of MILF-Manila talks

AFP, Manila

Fifteen people were killed in fresh attacks blamed on the biggest Moro separatist group in the Philippines as government negotiators flew to Malaysia on Wednesday to reopen peace talks with the guerrillas.

Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) guerrillas raided the town of M'lang shortly before dawn on Wednesday, killing five civilian residents including a six-year-old child, local military spokesman Major Julian Ando said.

Five other civilians were wounded in the attack on the predominantly Christian town about 900 km south of the capital Manila, Ando said.

Government militiamen and soldiers drove off the attackers and later recovered the bodies of five MILF rebels and three rifles, he said.

The MILF has attacked two other areas in the south since Tuesday, the military said.

The M'lang attack came hours before a four-member Philippine government negotiating team, led

by a member of President Gloria Arroyo's cabinet, left for Kuala Lumpur to resume peace talks with the MILF.

The rebel group has been waging a 25-year-old armed campaign for an Islamic state in the southern third of the largely-Christian Philippines.

The government team, led by Social Welfare Secretary Corazon Soliman, departed at about 2:30 pm (0630 GMT).

In the M'lang attack, Ando charged that the guerrillas blasted houses with rocket-propelled grenades, but MILF spokesman Eid Kabatu told AFP that his group's forces had only attacked a military detachment in the town and denied that civilians were targets.

He said it was possible there were civilians hit in the crossfire but said the MILF had not suffered any casualties.

A day earlier, about 75 MILF guerrillas stopped a cargo truck on the outskirts of nearby Carmen town, looted the goods, tied up the Christian driver and his helper and then shot them dead, Ando said. Kabatu also denied the military claim.