

World alarmed as N Korea threatens nuclear test

AFP, London

World leaders reacted with alarm yesterday at news that North Korea plans to carry out a nuclear test, warning it could have serious consequences for the impoverished hermit nation.

"A missile test launch would be viewed by the United Kingdom and the rest of the international community as a highly provocative act with serious consequences for the DPRK," said a spokesman for the British Foreign Office.

"It would raise tensions in an already tense region," he added.

Pyongyang said Tuesday that it intended to carry out a test of nuclear weapons in response to threats and sanctions from the United States which it said was trying to topple the communist nation.

"The US extreme threat of a nuclear war and sanctions and pressure compel the DPRK (North Korea) to conduct a nuclear test, an essential process for bolstering

nuclear deterrent, as a corresponding measure," it said.

The statement, issued by the foreign ministry, gave no time or date for the test, which if carried out would be the first anywhere in the world since 1998.

Japan was first to respond to the announcement, with Foreign Minister Taro Aso denouncing the idea as unforgivable.

"It would be a threat to peace. We would never be able to forgive such a move," Aso told reporters. "It would gravely affect Northeast Asia, including Japan."

Aso said he did not doubt North Korea's resolve in testing a nuclear device.

"In the past, the country has done what it had said earlier. So I think it would be wrong automatically to think the country will not do this."

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov also urged North Korea to be cautious, calling on the US to engage in one-on-one negotiations with North Korea to resolve interna-

tional concerns over Pyongyang's nuclear programme.

Together with other countries involved in six-party talks with North Korea, "we are working with Pyongyang in order that it exercises restraint and in order to prevent hasty steps" by North Korea, Lavrov told journalists.

But the Russian minister cast doubt on Pyongyang's seriousness, saying: "It is not the first time that we've heard this kind of announcement, but for the most part these announcements have not been confirmed."

The current standoff over North Korea's nuclear programme erupted in 2002 when the United States accused Pyongyang of running a secret uranium enrichment programme in violation of a 1994 denuclearisation agreement.

But tensions between the US administration of President George W. Bush and Pyongyang have risen since North Korea test-launched seven missiles in July, heightening speculation that a nuclear weapons

test was in the works.

The South Korean presidential Blue House had no immediate comment, as Tuesday is a public holiday marking National Foundation Day.

The Seoul government has for years adopted a "sunshine policy" of engagement with the North, but suspended regular aid shipments after the missile tests.

And a British expert on Japan and northeast Asia security, John Swenson-Wright, warned Tuesday's threat should not be underestimated, but said it could be part of a delicate diplomatic game of brinkmanship.

"It's very serious because of the implications for the region and for the Bush administration proliferation policy," the expert with the Chatham House international affairs think-tank in London told AFP.

"I would be surprised if they went ahead and tested. It exposes them to a great deal of risk, far more than the missile launch."

Israeli jets fly over Lebanon despite troop pullout

REUTERS, Marjayoun

Israeli warplanes flew over Lebanon yesterday two days after Israeli forces withdrew from virtually all of south Lebanon, witnesses said.

At least two jets flew in from Israel at medium altitude and headed north toward central Lebanon, the witnesses said.

Israeli forces pulled out from south Lebanon on Sunday except from the small village in line with a UN truce that ended a war between Israel and Hezbollah guerrillas.

Lebanon says overflights violate Lebanese sovereignty and breach a UN resolution that halted the fighting on August 14.

Israeli government spokeswoman Miri Eisin told Reuters in Jerusalem that the overflights would continue to help ensure that arms supplies do not reach Hezbollah from Syria.

"Israel's redeployment along the international border does not negate Israel's right to self-defence and to assist in the implementation of the arms embargo, especially when it comes to the Syria-Lebanese border, an issue that has not yet been resolved as part of the Security Council resolution," she said.

Russia slaps sanctions on Georgia

AFP, Moscow

A wave of sanctions by Russia against its southern neighbour Georgia came into effect yesterday in the wake of a spy scandal that has brought relations between the two ex-Soviet states to a new low.

Russia announced Monday sweeping punitive economic measures against Georgia, including a halt to all air, sea, rail and road transport, as well as postal deliveries and money transfers made through the Russian postal system.

The sanctions were expected to have an immediate and painful effect on Russia's southern neighbour, and came in spite of Tbilisi's release of four Russian officers it had detained on spying charges last week.

The arrests sparked a diplomatic crisis, with President Vladimir Putin labelling them "state terrorism".



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (L) and former South African president and anti-apartheid activist Nelson Mandela (C) arrive at the Nelson Mandela Foundation in Johannesburg Monday. The leaders of South Africa and India renewed their commitment on Monday to push for expansion of the United Nations Security Council to include more developing nations from Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Tigers agree to peace talks in Oslo

REUTERS, Colombo

told peace mediator Norway it would be prepared to hold talks either on Oct 30 or on Nov 10 due to parliamentary commitments.

"This is positive news," said one senior government official, asking not to be named, saying President Mahinda Rajapakse would still need to give the final approval on the Tigers date.

"We need to work out some of the details," he added.

The government and the rebels have repeatedly said they are ready to resume talks after a five-month impasse. But sporadic fighting continues -- the air force bombed rebel territory in the north on Tuesday after the Tigers fired artillery at army positions -- and Nordic truce monitors see little will from either side to halt the violence.

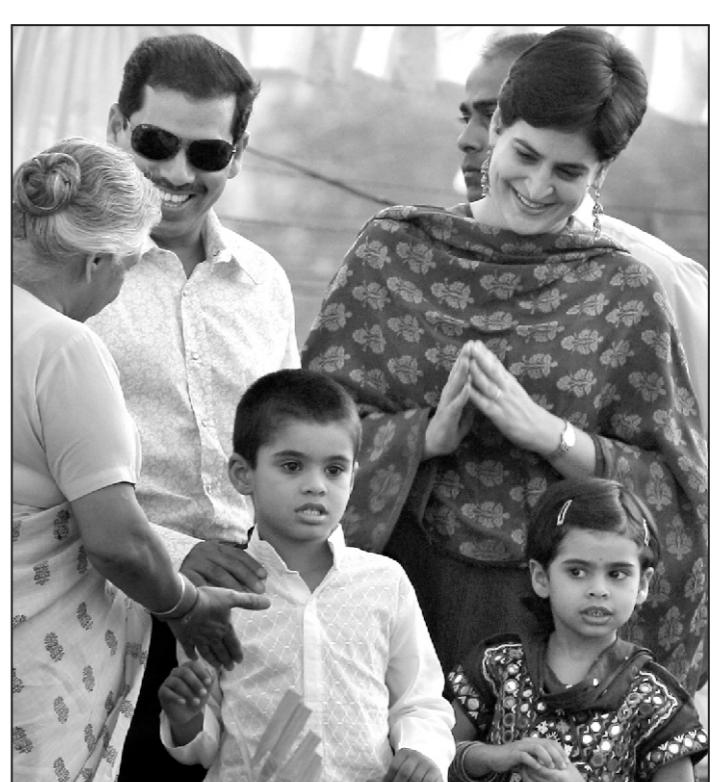
Some analysts fear talks might be premature given the upsurge in fighting, the worst since a 2002 truce.

Emboldened by the capture of strategic rebel territory south of the northeast harbour of Trincomalee, some military officials say they are keen to inflict as many casualties on the Tigers as possible before talks.

The Tigers have warned the tattered truce will collapse completely if military attacks on their territory continue.

Analysts suspect shadowy Tiger leader Velupillai Prabhakaran is buying time. They say he's ready for his political wing to talk with the government to give his forces the chance to regroup after fierce aerial bombing, artillery and rocket fire by the security forces.

Prabhakaran's annual Heroes' Day address in November is approaching, and after two consecutive years threatening to resume the Tigers' freedom struggle for a separate homeland, is seen under pressure.



'Violence driving 9,000 Iraqis from homes every week'

AFP, Geneva

The number of Iraqis fleeing their homes to escape sectarian strife is rising dramatically, and has now reached almost 9,000 per week, the International Organisation for Migration said yesterday.

Spiralling violence between Iraq's Shiite and Sunni Muslim communities since February has pushed the number of internal refugees in central and southern Iraq to around 190,000, IOM spokeswoman Jemini Pandya told journalists.

The IOM said it is working with the Iraqi authorities to take stock of the problem.

"The displacement is increasingly looking like permanent settlement and there is urgent need for shelter and employment solutions for these families," said Pandya.

According to Rafiq Tschannen, the IOM's head of mission in Iraq, host communities are taking in the displaced, who are usually from the same religious community.

'Myanmar to crackdown on Indian rebels'

AFP, Guwahati

crackdown.

"We are ready to give the Myanmarese military a real taste of our fighting skills," Mutalatu said.

No official confirmation of the claims was immediately available.

Two weeks ago India urged Myanmar, with which it shares a 1,640-km unfenced border, to intensify operations against anti-India separatist rebels and curb the smuggling of drugs and arms.

Myanmar has repeatedly assured New Delhi that it would not let Indian rebels operate from its soil. The last crackdown on Indian rebel camps was in February.

India says there are about 30 insurgent groups active in its northeast, of which at least 12 operate out of Myanmar's northern regions.

More than 50,000 people have lost their lives to insurgency in the northeast since India's independence in 1947.

Myanmar's oppressive military is cracking down hard on political dissent in a bid to crush any public support for possible UN

South Korea's FM on course to replace Annan

REUTERS, United Nations

South Korea's Foreign Minister Ban Ki-Moon said on Tuesday he bore "a heavy sense of responsibility" after an informal ballot that virtually assured he would become the next United Nations secretary-general.

Ban, 62, will probably be named formally on October 9 in an official vote by the 15-nation UN Security Council after winning four straw polls, including a crucial one on Monday.

After the council's recommendation, the 192-member UN General Assembly is expected to endorse Ban as the eighth secretary-general of the United Nations since 1946 to replace Kofi Annan of Ghana, who ends 10 years in office on December 31.

"It is quite clear from today's vote that Minister Ban Ki Moon is the candidate the Security Council will recommend" to the General Assembly, China's UN ambassador, Wang Guangya, told reporters.



PHOTO: AFP

South Korean Foreign Minister Ban Ki-Moon (L) is congratulated by his office staff at the Foreign Ministry in Seoul yesterday. South Korea was jubilant after its Foreign Minister Ban Ki-Moon took a decisive step towards becoming the next United Nations secretary general.

Two US soldiers, 10 Taliban killed in Afghan clash

REUTERS, Kabul/Khost

Two US and four Afghan soldiers and 10 Taliban fighters were killed in separate clashes in the eastern Afghan province of Kunar and Khost, the US-led coalition force said yesterday.

Three US soldiers were also wounded in the fighting late on Monday in the province's Pech district.

Taliban insurgents attacked a border police post in southeastern Afghanistan, sparking a gunbattle, which left three policemen and 10 rebels dead, a provincial governor said.

A group of militants tried to storm the checkpoint in the Gornal district of unruly Paktika province late Monday and fled after an hour-long battle, governor Mohammed Akram Khepewak told AFP on Tuesday.

"Three border police were martyred and 10 Taliban were killed in the one-hour fighting in Gornal district," he said.

Three police officers were also wounded in the incident, he added.

action against the junta, analysts say.

In the past week, the authorities have arrested six pro-democracy activists, going to their homes, ordering them to pack a few personal belongings, and then marching them off without a word on their fate or colleagues.

The arrests came in the same week that Myanmar was discussed at the United Nations Security Council, with the United States vowing to introduce a draft resolution on human rights abuses in the country formerly known as Burma.

"The military is well aware of the impact that a UN resolution can have, so basically it seems the military prioritises internal security ahead of international punishment," Myanmar analyst Aung Naing Oo told AFP.