

N Korea is preparing for satellite launch

AP, Seoul

North Korea said yesterday it is preparing to shoot a satellite into orbit, its clearest reference yet to an impending launch that neighbours and the US suspect will be a provocative test of a long-range missile.

The statement from the North's space technology agency comes amid growing international concern that the communist nation is gearing up to fire a version of its most advanced missile capable of reaching the US in coming days, in violation of a UN Security Council resolution.

North Korea asserted last week that it bears the right to "space development" words the regime has used in the past to disguise a missile test. In 1998, North Korea test-fired a Taepodong-1 ballistic missile over Japan and then claimed to have put a satellite into orbit.

Lankan troops enter last rebel-held town

Colombo probes origin of Tiger aircraft

AP, AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan forces entered the last northern town under rebel control Tuesday, the military said, as the government brushed aside international calls for a cease-fire to allow tens of thousands of civilians to escape the warzone.

In recent months, the military has driven the Tamil Tigers out of their major strongholds in the north and confined them to a small patch of coastal land along the northeast. The government has vowed to destroy the rebels and end the 25-year-old civil war plaguing this island nation.

After breaching rebel defences, troops entered Puthukkudiyiruppu on Tuesday and were fighting house-to-house battles with small groups of rebels on the outskirts of the town, military spokesman Brig. Udaya Nanayakkara said.

"They are resisting and retreating," Nanayakkara said of the rebel fighters.

The town's capture would be another devastating blow to the already reeling rebels and their dreams of creating an independent state in the north and east. The guerrillas, who controlled a wide swath of the north less than a year ago,

would be left with little more than a handful of villages and a small strip of coast.

Aid groups estimate as many as 200,000 civilians are trapped in the shrinking rebel area and international officials have expressed concern for the escalating civilian casualties.

Human Rights Watch said last week 2,000 civilians have been killed in recent months and accused both sides of committing war crimes.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called Monday for a halt to the fighting to allow the civilians to flee and for political talks to urgently end the conflict that has cost 70,000 lives since 1983.

"There is an urgent need to bring this conflict to an end without any further unnecessary loss of civilian life and destruction of Sri Lankan society," Ban said.

The government said Tuesday it had no plans to stop its offensive against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. "The LTTE must lay down its weapons and that will automatically guarantee a cease-fire," Foreign Secretary Palitha Kohona said.

In a letter to the United Nations on Monday, the rebels also appealed for a

cease-fire but said they would not lay down their weapons.

The EU also has called for an immediate halt to fighting and says the government must stop its human rights abuses.

The rebels have been fighting for an independent state for the Tamil minority after decades of marginalisation by governments dominated by the Sinhalese majority.

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka's military said Tuesday it was trying to establish how the Tamil Tigers managed to buy light planes abroad, smuggle them onto the island and establish a rebel air force.

The probe follows the latest Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) air assault against the capital using two of their Czech-made aircraft.

The military shot down one aircraft just before it reached the intended target at the main airbase, while the second plane crashed into a tax building here on Friday night and exploded in a ball of fire.

"At this stage we do not know the exact origin of the planes except that they had been manufactured in the Czech Republic," Sri Lankan Air Force spokesman Janaka Nanayakkara said.



'Urgent need' for end to Lanka crisis: UN

AFP, United Nations

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon restated his concern Monday about continued hostilities between rebel and government forces in Sri Lanka, and called for a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

"The UN deplores the increasing casualties among civilians trapped in the intense fighting between the government and the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) over the last several days," Ban told reporters.

The global community "would strongly support a suspension of fighting for the purpose of allowing safe passage of the civilian population trying to flee the conflict," he added.

The island's military rejected Tamil calls for a truce Monday, as rebel forces remained cornered northeast of the island.

The rebels said the global actors such as the United Nations, United States, the European Union and Japan must pressure the Sri Lankan government to accepting a ceasefire.

Sri Lankan relatives grieve over the bodies of eleven Sinhalese villagers during a funeral service in Bibile, some 300kms north-east of Colombo on Monday after they were allegedly killed by suspected Tamil Tiger gunmen in the remote village of Kiritimiyawa in the east of the island some two days earlier.



Thousands of supporters of ousted Thai premier Thaksin Shinawatra surround the seat of government as riot police (L) form a line in Bangkok yesterday reigniting the kingdom's political turmoil just days ahead of a key regional summit. The protesters gathered at Government House to call on Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva to dissolve his two-month-old government and hold snap elections, saying they would stage a three-day sit-in to press their demands.

US senators for rethink on Pak aid

AFP, Washington

US senators on Monday urged a rethink on aid to Pakistan after a watchdog said more than 12 billion dollars in US spending had failed to eliminate the country's militant haven.

The call came as the foreign ministers of Pakistan and neighbouring Afghanistan start a week of talks in Washington with President Barack Obama's administration on how to combat extremism.

The Government Accountability Office, the investigative arm of Congress, found the United States has spent 12.3 billion dollars since 2002 aiming to end the "terrorist threat"

on Pakistan's border with Afghanistan.

"Despite six years of US and Pakistani government efforts, al-Qaeda has regenerated its ability to attack the United States and continues to maintain a safe haven in Pakistan's FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas)," it said.

The tribal areas, which border Afghanistan, have never been fully under Pakistani control and are believed to be the hideout for al-Qaeda and Taliban militants forced out of Afghanistan following the 2001 US military offensive.

Senator Robert Menendez, who heads the Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee on international assistance, said the report showed US aid to Pakistan was not working.

FBI warns of Mumbai-type terror attacks on US cities

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Washington

Extremists 'with large agendas and little money can use rudimentary weapons' to sow terror, raising the spectre that the Mumbai attacks could embolden terrorists seeking to attack US cities, the top US investigation agency FBI warned.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) is expanding its focus beyond al-Qaeda and into splinter groups, radicals who try to enter the country through the visa waiver programme and 'home-grown terrorists,' FBI Director Robert S. Mueller said at the Council on Foreign Relations here Monday.

"The universe of crime and terrorism stretches out infinitely before us, and we too are working to find what we believe to be out there but cannot always see," said the head of the agency charged with protecting the US against domestic and international terrorism.

"Our primary threat continues to come from the tribal areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan," Mueller said. "But we are seeing persistent activity elsewhere, from the Maghreb and the Sahel to Yemen."

US, he said was increasingly concerned with pockets of people around the world that identify with al-Qaeda and its ideology. "Some may have little or no actual contact with al-Qaeda. Yet fringe organisations can quickly gain broader aspirations and appeal."

China closes Tibet to foreign tourists

Say tour agencies, hotel

AFP, Beijing

China has closed Tibet to foreign tourists ahead of next month's highly sensitive 50th anniversary of a failed uprising against Chinese rule, tour agencies and other industry people told AFP yesterday.

The reported ban comes amid deep tensions in the southwestern Chinese city of Chengdu that normally organise trips into Tibet also confirmed the ban on foreigners.

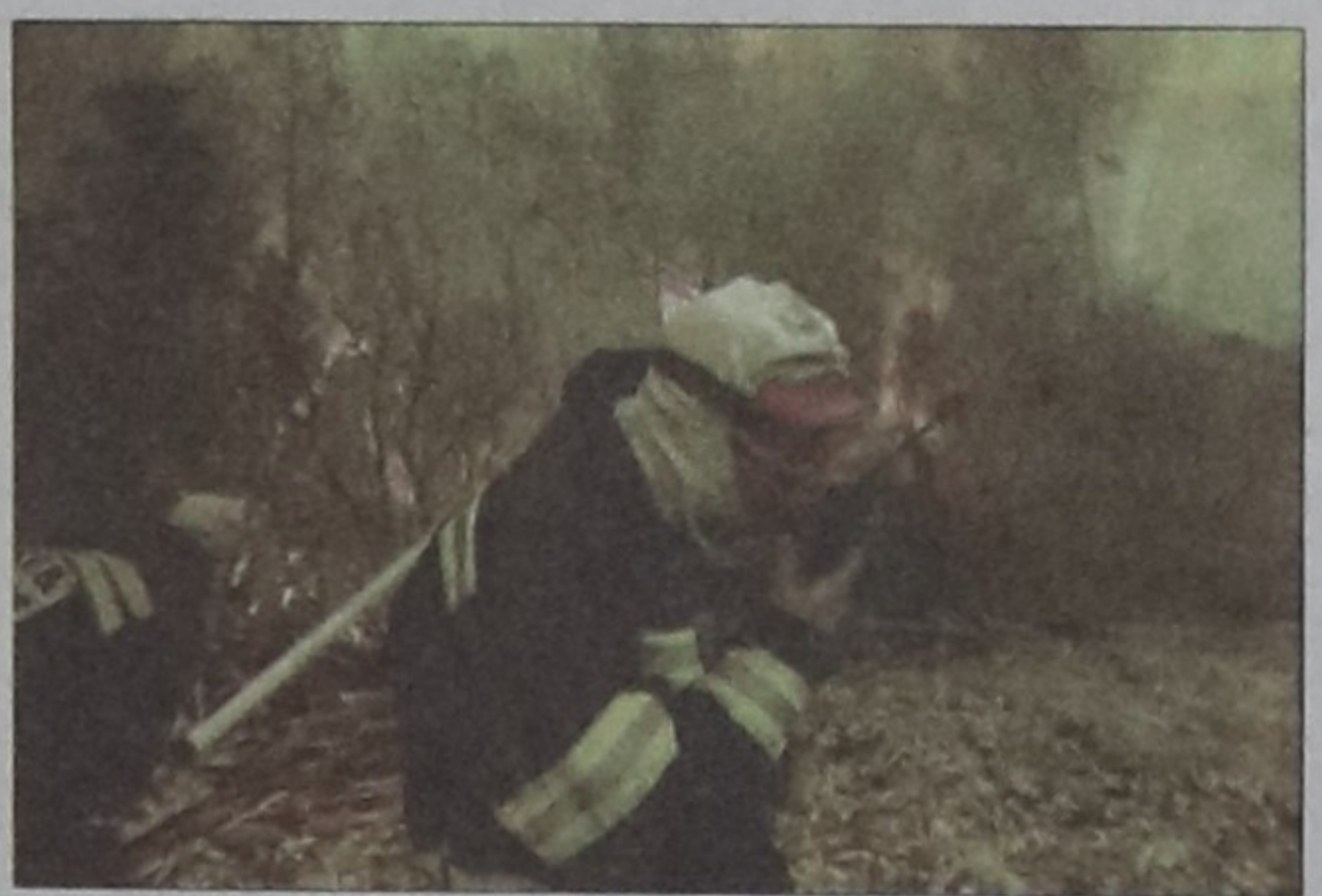
"Foreigners cannot go there in March because we have stopped giving out permits," an employee at the Chengdu Overseas Tourism Company, another government-run travel agency, told AFP.

employee at a government-run travel agency in Lhasa, who could not be named for fear of reprisals, told AFP.

He said the city's tourism bureau had decided this at a meeting in mid-February, although it was unclear when exactly the orders were given.

A hotel in the Tibetan capital and three travel agencies in the southwestern Chinese city of Chengdu that normally organise trips into Tibet also confirmed the ban on foreigners.

"Foreigners cannot go there in March because we have stopped giving out permits," an employee at the Chengdu Overseas Tourism Company, another government-run travel agency, told AFP.



A South African firefighter gets ready to attend to a fast spreading fire in Somerset west on the outskirts of Cape Town on Monday. The fire spread quickly through the area fuelled by winds.

ME truce deal could mean return of Barghouti

AP, Ramallah

While a possible Israeli-Palestinian prisoner swap focuses on a famous Israeli soldier, the prisoner most likely to affect the direction of Mideast peace is a brash and chubby Palestinian long seen as a potential successor to his people's aging president.

Marwan Barghouti is the most popular Palestinian leader since Yasser Arafat. He has spent the last seven years in an Israeli prison after being convicted of playing a role in attacks that killed four Israelis and a Greek monk.

A lifetime member of President Mahmoud Abbas' venerable and corruption-riddled Fatah movement, Barghouti is seen as perhaps the group's best chance to restore its eroded credibility. Many Palestinians and some Israelis see him as the only figure capable of bridging the myriad rifts among Palestinians and leading them toward their long elusive dream of statehood.

Barghouti is a secularist who works with Islamists. He supports negotiations with Israel, speaks fluent Hebrew and has Israeli friends, but he built his reputation through anti-Israel diatribes during the second Palestinian uprising.

Detractors in Israel call Barghouti a cold-blooded killer who should remain locked up. The Likud hard-liners who will head the incoming Israeli government are likely to share that view. Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu will likely be forming a new Israeli government within six weeks, making the timing of a swap important for those who hope to see Barghouti released.

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