

US ON KOREAS' FACE-OFF

Obama: prepare for N Korea aggression



REUTERS, Washington

President Barack Obama has directed the US military to coordinate with South Korea to "ensure readiness" and deter future aggression from North Korea, the White House said yesterday.

The United States gave strong backing to plans by South Korean President Lee Myung-bak to punish North Korea for sinking one of its naval ships, White House spokesman Robert Gibbs said in a statement.

The White House urged North Korea to apologise and change its behaviour, he said.

"We endorse President Lee's demand that North Korea immediately apologise and punish those responsible for the attack, and, most importantly, stop its belligerent and threatening behaviour," Gibbs said.

"US support for South Korea's defence is unequivocal, and the president has directed his military commanders to coordinate closely with their Republic of Korea counterparts to ensure readiness and to deter future aggression," he said.

Hillary: Korea's security situation 'precarious'



AP, Beijing

US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said yesterday that North Korea's sinking of a South Korean warship has created a "highly precarious" security situation in the region and that the Obama administration is working to prevent an escalation of tension that could lead to conflict.

"We are working hard to avoid an escalation of belligerence and provocation," Hillary said. "This is a highly precarious situation that the North Koreans have caused in the region."

Hillary is in Beijing for high-level strategic and economic talks and members of her delegation say she has an uphill battle to convince the Chinese either that North Korea sank the ship -- something Pyongyang has denied -- or to support new UN measures against the fellow communist nation.

Hillary said as a result of her discussions with Chinese leaders on Sunday and Monday she believed they "recognise the gravity of the situation we face."

South Korea cuts trade, sea lanes with North

AFP, Seoul

South Korea yesterday halted trade with North Korea as part of a package of reprisals for the sinking of one of its warships, drawing strong US support but threats of attack from the communist state.

President Lee Myung-Bak also banned the North's merchant ships from South Korean waters and said Seoul would refer the March 26 attack -- which killed 46 sailors -- to the United Nations Security Council for punishment.

In a nationally televised address, a scribe-looking Lee vowed an immediate military response to any future aggression.

He said South Korea had in the past repeatedly tolerated the North's "brutality."

"But now things are different. North Korea will pay a price corresponding to its provocative acts," he said, demanding an apology for the sinking of the Cheonan, a 1,200-tonne corvette.

The North's military threatened to open fire at any South Korean loudspeakers broadcasting propaganda across the border if Seoul follows through on its pledge to install them as part of the reprisals.

"From now on, (South) Korea will not tolerate any provocative act by the North and will maintain the principle of proactive deterrence," Lee said.

"If our territorial waters, airspace or territory are violated, we will immediately exercise our right of self-defence."

Analysts predicted cross-border tensions would remain high for months but said major conflict was unlikely.

A multinational investigation team last Thursday reported finding "overwhelming evidence" that a North Korean submarine fired a heavy torpedo which sank the Cheonan near the disputed border.

The United States and numerous other nations have condemned the attack, seen in Seoul as one of the worst provocations since the 1950-53 Korean War. The North's ally China, which wields a Security Council veto, has only called on all sides to show restraint.

Japan said it supported Seoul's push for Security Council punishment and was also studying more sanctions of its own against Pyongyang.

Seoul's Defence Minister Kim Tae-Young said the US



South Korean soldiers take a position during a drill at a guard post near the Demilitarised Zone separating two Koreas in Yanggu, 130 km northeast of Seoul, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

and South Korean navies would soon stage an anti-submarine drill off the west coast and his government would resume the border broadcasts halted six years ago.

The North says the South has faked evidence of its involvement in the Cheonan's sinking as part of a plot to ignite conflict. It threatens "all-out war" in response to any punitive moves.

A spokesman for North Korea's National Defence Commission, the country's top body and chaired by leader Kim Jong-Il, described Lee as a "traitor" and termed his speech "another clumsy farce" designed to cover up the conspiracy.

The North's military has separately expressed

anger at new moves to wage psychological warfare, vowing to open fire at propaganda posters or loudspeakers on the southern side.

In his strongly worded speech, delivered symbolically on Seoul's war memorial, Lee said trade and exchanges would be suspended since any cooperation was "meaningless" under present circumstances.

He exempted the jointly run Kaesong industrial estate just north of the border, and humanitarian aid for the North's children, from the trade cut-off.

Yang Moo-Jin, of Seoul's University of North Korean Studies, said Lee had "declared an era of cold war" and tensions would escalate further.

Senior Maoist rebels arrested in India over Dantewada massacre

AFP, RAIPUR, India

Indian police yesterday said they had arrested six senior Maoist rebels suspected of plotting an ambush that killed 76 policemen in the central state of Chhattisgarh last month.

The left-wing guerrillas have stepped up attacks in response to a government offensive that began late last year in the so-called "Red Corridor" stretching across central and eastern India.

"During search operations in the forest of Dantewada district, we arrested six Maoists including a militia commander on Sunday night," Dantewada district police chief Amresh Mishra told AFP by phone.

"All the six were involved in the killing of 76 security forces, and they have revealed how they executed the plan to set the ambush and kill the policemen," he said.

The April 6 carnage in the Dantewada district of Chhattisgarh was the bloodiest single blow by the Maoists in their decades-

long struggle against India's regional and central governments.

The insurgency, which started as a peasant uprising in 1967, has been identified by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh as the number one threat to domestic security.

Rebels in Dantewada also killed 35 people in a landmine attack on a bus earlier this month.

Until now, the government has resisted calls to deploy the military against the Maoists, preferring instead to use regular and paramilitary police as the front-line force.

But Home Minister P. Chidambaram -- who has borne the brunt of public criticism over the handling of the violence -- recently acknowledged that changes were needed and said he would request wider powers.

Tribal groups and many rural areas have been left behind by the country's economic development, and poverty and discontent with local government corruption are seen as fuelling support for the insurgents.

Huge turnout in controversial Ethiopia polls

AFP, Addis Ababa

Ethiopia's election board yesterday said the turnout was huge in the legislative polls and prepared to announce provisional results, amid mounting accusations the ruling regime fixed the vote.

The day after a largely peaceful polling process, the electoral commission announced that 90 percent of the Horn of Africa country's 32 million registered voters cast a ballot.

In a statement carried by the official ENA new agency, the electoral commission said "more than 90 percent of the 32 million eligible voters voted" across the country's 43,000 polling stations.

The commission's vice chairman Adissu Guebre Egziabier said the counting of ballots was complete and the results of all the polling stations still needed to be tallied up for a national estimate.

"We are currently calculating all the figures to come up with a nationwide amount," he told AFP.

Opposition moves to impeach Thai premier

Curfew stays in the capital for another week

AP, Bangkok

Opposition leaders moved to impeach Thailand's prime minister yesterday for his handling of rioting and violence in Bangkok, and an army official said the capital would remain under curfew for another week as a precaution against further unrest.

The impeachment measure and a move to censure top Cabinet officials was expected to be easily defeated. But it reflects deep rifts that divide the country after two months of protests that left at least 88 dead and the Thai capital in flames.

With traffic once again choking the Bangkok streets, the stock exchange, schools and many offices opened for the first time after a week of government-ordered holidays. Thousands of residents bearing mops, brooms and rubbish bins joined in a citywide effort to clean up from the riots.

Still, authorities in charge of the government's crisis response center said they would propose extending a late-night curfew on the capital, which remains under a state of emergency, and other volatile areas for another week or so.

"The purpose of the curfew is to separate the terrorists from the public," said army spokesman Sansern Kaewkamnerd. He said the late hours of the curfew would not cause significant disturbances to the public.

The Cabinet was to meet Tuesday to approve the extension.

Opposition whip Wittaya Buranasiri said the motion to impeach Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva was introduced by the opposition Pheu Thai Party allies of ousted former leader Thaksin Shinawatra, whom the anti-government Red Shirt protesters generally support.

It also sought to censure several of his top Cabinet members.

Members of the Pheu Thai allege Abhisit and his deputy prime minister abused their power in using force in their crackdown on the protests.

The motions underscore a growing political and social rift that has opened up since the Red Shirt movement swept into Bangkok in March, demanding Abhisit resign and call early elections. The Red Shirts want Abhisit out because they claim he came to power illegitimately with the help of back-room deals and military pres-

China calls for restraint on S Korea warship

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday again called for restraint from all sides over the sinking of a South Korean warship blamed on Pyongyang, after Seoul cut off trade with the North over the deadly incident.

"China hopes the parties will maintain calmness and restraint and properly deal with relevant issues," Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Ma Zhaoxu said after a day of high-level Sino-US talks, Xinhua news agency reported.

Ma said the Chinese and US sides had discussed the March 26 sinking of the Cheonan as part of the Strategic and Economic Dialogue -- annual wide-ranging talks which this year have been somewhat overshadowed by Korean tensions.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Chinese Vice Premier Wang Qishan are leading the strategic part of the talks.

The spokesman said Beijing was "highly concerned" about the issue, reiterating that it was committed to stability on the Korean peninsula and throughout northeast Asia, and wanted to avoid an escalation of tensions.

His statements echoed comments he made on Thursday, shortly after a multinational panel of investigators said it had concluded that a North Korean submarine had torpedoed the Cheonan, killing 46 South Korean sailors.

Asean talks on labour rights to be continued

AFP, Hanoi

Asean ministers will hold further talks on a convention formally protecting the region's millions of migrant workers, Indonesia's labour minister said yesterday.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) three years ago reached a landmark agreement to protect the labour rights of the region's migrant workers, who form the backbone of many of its economies.

However, that pact was not legally binding, outlining only a political commitment to protect migrants' rights while the bloc works on a binding convention.

"The formal instrument will be discussed in more detail at the next meeting," Indonesia's Minister of Manpower and Transmigration, Muhaimin Iskandar, told AFP after talks in Hanoi with his Asean counterparts.

He did not give a date for the next round of talks, but labour ministers from the bloc's 10 member states meet every two years.

"One of the points we agreed on relates to support and cooperation for migrant workers," the minister said.

Indian premier trying to tackle Pak 'trust gap'

BBC News

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh says lack of trust is the main obstacle to improved relations with Pakistan.

Mr Singh told a news conference in Delhi that he was trying to narrow the gap between the two countries.

Ties have been strained since Pakistan-based militants attacked Mumbai in 2008, killing more than 160 people.

Earlier this month India and Pakistan agreed to hold more peace talks after a meeting between Mr Singh and Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani.

The countries' foreign ministers are to meet in July after an invitation from Islamabad.

Mr Singh made his remarks at a rare news conference -- his first since his government was re-elected last year and one of only a few he has given since coming to power in 2004.

"India cannot realise its full development potential unless we have the best possible relations with our neighbours, and Pakistan happens to be the largest neighbour of ours," he told reporters in the Indian capital.

"The trust gap is the biggest problem."

Mr Singh said he was doing his best to bridge that gap. At the same time, he added, he would not surrender India's vital national interest.

He said he was hopeful that the foreign minister-level talks in July could move the stalled peace process forward.

"This will be the first major effort to deal with the underlying cause that is the lack of trust between our two nations."

Talks formally resumed earlier this year but ended with little more than an agreement to meet again.

The two countries' peace process broke down after the 2008 Mumbai attacks.

Delhi has publicly complained that Islamabad has done little to crack down on elements and groups in Pakistan who planned and executed the attack.

Mr Singh described his government's record in the 12 months since re-election as one of "reasonable achievement".

He condemned a recent rise in attacks by Maoist rebels and conceded that inflation, especially of food prices, "continues to be a matter of deep concern".

Mr Singh said that, while he had no immediate plans to retire, he would be happy to step down in favour of a younger leader if his party asked him to.



A portrait of slain Italian photographer Fabio Polenghi is displayed at his funeral at a temple in Bangkok yesterday. Polenghi, also a documentary maker, was shot while covering the military offensive to close down long-running "Red Shirts" demonstrations in the capital on May 19.

PHOTO: AFP

Pakistan calls for talks with India to build trust

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan called yesterday for "sustained and meaningful" dialogue with India after Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said a trust deficit was the main obstacle in ties between the nuclear-armed rivals.

Speaking at a news conference in New Delhi, Singh said India was willing to discuss all outstanding issues with Pakistan but "the trust gap is (the) biggest problem."

Pakistan said it agreed that mistrust should be dispelled.

"Obviously, there is a mutual trust deficit and we need to build trust between our two countries on solid foundations so that our two countries and our people can live in peace and prosperity," said Pakistani foreign ministry spokesman Abdul Basir.

"To this end, Pakistan looks forward to a sustained and meaningful engagement with India with a view to free our relations from all disputes and conflicts."

Relations between the neighbours, who have fought three wars since 1947, went into a freeze after Pakistan-based militants attacked the Indian city of Mumbai in 2008, killing 166 people.

But Singh and Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani met on the sidelines of a regional conference last month and agreed to get talks going again to tackle their disputes.

For India, the main issue in its relations with Pakistan is security, with Islamist militants, who India says are backed by Pakistan, attacking Indian security forces in the disputed Kashmir region and launching attacks in Indian cities.

Pakistan says the core dispute is over Muslim-majority Kashmir, which both countries claim in full but rule in part.

Talking to leaders of Pakistan-ruled Kashmir, Gilani said his government remained committed to a peaceful, negotiated settlement of the Kashmir dispute.

"There is an imperative need to end the long legacy of hostility and distrust and to work towards a peaceful solution of the Kashmir dispute in accordance with the wishes of the people of Kashmir," from prime minister's office quoted him as saying in a statement.

Pakistan would continue to support the "just cause" of Kashmiri people, he said.

India accuses Pakistan of training and sending Muslim guerrillas across their de facto border in Kashmir to fight Indian rule.

Pakistan denies the charge and says it supports what it calls a freedom struggle by the people of Kashmir against what it sees as the brutal and illegitimate Indian occupation of the region.