

## Radiation sensed near border

Says South Korea

AP, Seoul

Abnormally high radiation levels were detected near the border between the two Koreas days after North Korea claimed to have mastered a complex technology key to manufacturing a hydrogen bomb, Seoul said yesterday.

The Science Ministry said its investigation ruled out a nuclear test by North Korea, but failed to determine the source of the radiation. It said there was no evidence of a strong earthquake, which follows an atomic explosion.

On May 12, North Korea claimed its scientists succeeded in creating a nuclear fusion reaction a technology necessary to manufacture a hydrogen bomb. In its announcement, the North did not say how it would use the technology, only calling it a "breakthrough toward the development of new energy."

South Korean experts doubted the North actually made such a breakthrough. Scientists around the world have been experimenting with fusion for decades, but it has yet to be developed into a viable energy alternative.

On May 15, however, the atmospheric concentration of xenon an inert gas released after a nuclear explosion or and radioactive leakage from a nuclear power plant on the South Korean side their shared border was found to be eight times higher than normal, according to South Korea's Science Ministry.

South Korea subsequently looked for signs of a powerful, artificially induced earthquake. Experts, however, found no signs of a such a quake in North Korea, a ministry statement said.

"We determined that there was no possibility of an underground nuclear test," it said. The ministry said the gas is not harmful.

While any fusion test would have registered seismic activity, according to nuclear expert Whang Joo-ho of South Korea's Kyung Hee University, the presence of xenon could also have come from a leak.



Britain's (L-R) Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Danny Alexander, Prime Minister David Cameron, Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, and Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg sit during a meeting at number 10 Downing Street in London yesterday. Tax rises and public spending cuts look set to dominate Tuesday's budget as Britain's Conservative-led coalition stakes its reputation on bringing the public finances under control.

## Thai govt to grill suspected protest funders

REUTERS, Bangkok

The Thai authorities said yesterday they wanted to question dozens of people, including former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, his family and allies, on suspicion of funding recent bloody anti-government protests.

The protests, by disgruntled supporters of self-exiled Thaksin, descended into Thailand's worst political violence in living memory when troops moved in to disperse them on May 19.

The government has launched a reconciliation plan aimed at healing divisions between Thaksin's rural and urban poor supporters and the military- and royalist-linked establishment.

But it has also blamed Thaksin and allies for instigating the violence and filed charges of terrorism against them.

The Department of Special Investigation (DSI) -- Thailand's equivalent of the US FBI -- said 69 individuals and 14 companies made unusually large and frequent financial transactions beginning in September 2009 and running through two months of protests that troops forcibly ended last month.

"This is not an arrest or an indictment," Tharit Pengdith, the director general of the DSI, told reporters, referring to a list of people the authorities want to question, which includes Thaksin, his former wife, their two children, and many allies.

Authorities will summon these individuals to explain their transactions by July 31, Tharit said. He offered no evidence of how the transactions may have been linked to the unrest.

"We have no evidence beyond the fact that the transactions were unusually large and frequent, so we are asking these individuals to explain what the transactions were for, to establish whether they were linked to the protest," he said.

## Iran bars two UN nuke inspectors

REUTERS, Tehran

Iran has barred two UN nuclear inspectors from entering the Islamic Republic, a senior official was quoted as saying, in a further escalation of an international dispute over Tehran's nuclear ambitions.

The United Nations Security Council on June 9 imposed a fourth round of sanctions on the major oil producer because of nuclear activity the West suspects is aimed at making bombs. Tehran denies the charge.

The head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organisation, Ali Akbar Salehi, said the two inspectors were declared persona non-grata for filing an "untruthful" report by the UN International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) about the country's nuclear work.

Salehi, in comments carried by the ISNA news agency, did not name them nor give details over what elements of the report he did not believe were accurate, adding Tehran had asked the UN agency to replace the two inspectors.

There was no immediate comment from the IAEA, but a diplomat confirmed that Iran had notified the agency of the ban.

Theodore Karasik, research director at the Institute for Near East and Gulf Military Analysis, said Iran's move was "the first of what will be many retaliations" for the sanctions.

"It is part of the escalation ladder of tit-for-tat that is now beginning to emerge," he said in Dubai.

In its latest report on Iran in late May, the IAEA said the country was preparing extra equipment to enrich uranium to higher levels and also continued to stockpile nuclear material.

Enriched uranium can provide fuel for nuclear power plants, or material for bombs if refined much further.

The nine-page report showed Iran pushing ahead with higher-level enrichment and failing to answer the agency's questions about possible military dimensions to its nuclear work and address concerns about possible undisclosed activities.

## Obama and Netanyahu to meet July 6

REUTERS, Washington

The United States on Sunday hailed Israel's easing of its land blockade of Gaza and said President Barack Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu would discuss further steps when they meet in Washington on July 6.

The White House welcomed Israel's new rules for its land embargo, which has drawn heightened international criticism since a deadly raid on an aid flotilla bound for the Hamas-run Palestinian territory.

"We believe that the implementation of the policy announced by the government of Israel today should improve life for the people of Gaza," White House spokesman Robert Gibbs said.

## BP was told of oil safety fault 'weeks before blast'

BBC ONLINE

A Deepwater Horizon rig worker has told the BBC that he identified a leak in the oil rig's safety equipment weeks before the explosion.

Tyrone Benton said the leak was not fixed at the time, but that instead the faulty device was shut down and a second one relied on.

BP said rig owners Transocean were responsible for the operation and maintenance of that piece of equipment.

Transocean said it tested the device successfully before the accident.

Meanwhile, BP has said its costs in tackling the disaster have now risen to \$2bn (£1.34bn).

On 20 April, when the Deepwater Horizon rig exploded killing 11 people, the blow-out preventer, as the device is known, failed.

The most critical piece of safety equipment on the rig, they are designed to avert disasters just like the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

The blow-out preventer (BOP) has giant shears which are designed to cut and seal off the well's main pipe. The control pods are effectively

the brains of the blow-out preventer and contain both electronics and hydraulics. This is where Mr Benton said the problem was found.

"We saw a leak on the pod, so by seeing the leak we informed the company men," Mr Benton said of the earlier problem he had identified. "They have a control room where they could turn off that pod and turn on the other one, so that they don't have to stop production."

Professor Tad Patzek, petroleum expert at the University of Texas, was blunt in his assessment: "That is unacceptable. If you see any evidence of the blow-out preventer not functioning properly, you should fix it by whatever means possible."

Mr Benton said his supervisor e-mailed both BP and Transocean about the leaks when they were discovered.

He said he did not know whether the leaking pod was turned back on before the disaster or not.

He said to repair the control pod would have meant temporarily stopping drilling work on the rig at a time when it was costing BP \$500,000 (£337,000) a day to operate the Deepwater Horizon.

## 6 Nato soldiers killed in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

Bomb attacks and a helicopter crash killed six Nato soldiers yesterday in southern Afghanistan, where thousands of US-led troops are sharpening an ambitious campaign to flush out Taliban militants.

In the deadliest incident, three Australian commandos and a US soldier were killed when their helicopter crashed in Kandahar province, the single worst loss of life for the Australian military in the nearly nine-year Afghan war.

Another two Nato troops, including an American, were killed in separate bomb explosions elsewhere in the south, the spiritual home of the Taliban militia that is fighting an increasingly deadly insurgency against Western troops.



A view of a bridge that has been damaged by flood waters in Yujiang County, Jiangxi province yesterday. Floods and landslides across southern China have killed at least 88 people and left 48 missing in a week, Xinhua news agency said.

## China flood toll crosses 175

REUTERS, Beijing

Heavy rain across a swathe of southern China over the last week has killed at least 175 people and left 107 missing, as rivers broke their banks and landslides cut off road and rail links, state media said yesterday.

Torrential downpours have triggered flash floods, inundated crops, disrupted traffic and telecommunications, forcing the evacuation of more than 1 million people, according to Ministry of Civil Affairs figures.

The official China Daily put economic damage at 19.7 billion Yuan (\$2.89 billion).

The country's disaster relief departments raised the emergency response level on Saturday after more floods hit southern China and as authorities forecast more rainfall in coming days.

## Kyrgyz leader backs referendum as trouble flares

REUTERS, Jalalabad

Kyrgyz leader Roza Otunbayeva pledged yesterday to press ahead with a referendum in six days' time for the sake of stability, as violence flared again in the Central Asian state.

Kyrgyzstan's south has been volatile since a wave of ethnic bloodshed this month killed up to 2,000 people, destroyed entire neighbourhoods and sent 400,000 people fleeing for the Uzbek border, where they are living with little food in squalid camps.

The United States and Russia, which both operate military air bases in Kyrgyzstan, are concerned that unrest could spread into other parts of Central Asia, a former Soviet region lying on a major drug-trafficking route out of nearby Afghanistan.

Kyrgyz security forces clashed on Monday with ethnic Uzbeks near Osh, the city worst hit by the violence. At least two people were killed, officials and human rights groups said.

Otunbayeva, leader of the interim government that assumed power after an April revolt that overthrew the president, visited another southern city, Jalalabad, where she addressed local officials after flying over burned-out houses.

Her government plans to hold a referendum on Sunday on constitutional reform to devolve more power to the prime minister. Some officials have said it should be postponed due to the violence and the difficulties in administering strife-torn southern regions.

## China mine blast kills 47

AP, Beijing

At least 47 miners were killed when an explosion ripped through a coal mine in central China, the government said yesterday.

The blast hit a mine in Pingdingshan city in the province of Henan, the State Administration of Work Safety said. Seventy-five miners were trapped initially but 28 escaped, the central government said on its website.

State broadcaster CCTV reported on its website many of the deaths were caused by carbon monoxide poisoning set off by the explosion. An investigation is under way into the cause of the blast.

Footage on CCTV's evening newscast showed paramilitary sealing off a mine gate, routine practice for authorities after such disasters as they try to keep distraught relatives from storming the compound. Ambulances sat empty in a dirt lot outside the mine.

## Komorowski leads in Polish polls race

REUTERS, Warsaw

Poland's centrist presidential candidate Bronislaw Komorowski faces a tight run-off vote against his right-wing rival Jaroslaw Kaczynski on July 4 after beating him by only a few percentage points in a Sunday vote.

Financial markets would prefer a Komorowski victory because he would be expected to work smoothly with Prime Minister Donald Tusk's economically liberal government in tackling a big budget deficit and preparing the country for eventual euro adoption.

But first-round results gave the mild-mannered candidate of Poland's ruling pro-business Civic Platform (PO) a narrower margin of victory than many pre-election polls had suggested and he faces a stiff challenge to beat opposition leader Kaczynski.

## Israel sets out changes to Gaza blockade curbs

BBC ONLINE

Israel has given details of its plan to ease the blockade of Gaza, with all civilian goods now expected to be let into the territory.

Israel will allow items into Gaza unless they feature on a new list which specifies banned goods. The move will let in humanitarian aid, food and building supplies.

Israel tightened the Gaza blockade in 2005, but has faced heavy criticism since the recent killing of nine people on an aid flotilla heading to Gaza.

In a statement, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said a long list of previously banned items, which included some food, domestic equipment and building materials would be replaced by a shorter, specific list of "weapons and war materiel".

"From now on, there is a green light approval for all goods to enter Gaza except for military items and materials that can strengthen Hamas's military machine," Israeli government spokesman Mark Regev told the AFP news agency.

In Washington, a White House spokesman said the Israeli move "should improve life for the people of Gaza", and urged all parties to avoid "unnecessary confrontation" going forward.

The changes to the terms of the blockade had been proposed by Middle East peace envoy Tony Blair.

Speaking after the deal was announced, Mr Blair said Hamas, which runs the Gaza Strip, could become part of a peace process by releasing captive Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit and renouncing violence.

But he insisted that his main concern was about quality of life in the territory.

"My concern is if you improve the lives of people in Gaza... I think you have got a far better chance of creating peace," he told the BBC.

In its statement, Israel pledged to expand operations at land crossings into Gaza, increasing the capacity for inspecting and transferring goods into the territory.

Items classified as "dual-use" (suitable for civilian or military use) would be reassessed and goods destined for projects such as UN-backed house building would be assured of entry, an Israeli government statement said.

There was also a promise to "streamline" the entry and exit of people for humanitarian and medical reasons. Gazans have limited access to medical facilities and seriously ill Palestinians often require urgent medical attention inside Israel.



Indigenous people from Bolivia celebrate the rising sun during a winter solstice ceremony in Tiwanaku, 70 km (43.5 miles) from La Paz yesterday. The solstice coincides with the Aymara Indian New Year.