

North's artillery strike alarms world powers

AFP, Washington

The United States vowed to defend its ally South Korea after North Korea rained artillery shells on its neighbour yesterday, killing two people and touching off wide-spread alarm in world capitals.

In a powerfully-worded statement, the White House said the United States "strongly condemns this attack and calls on North Korea to halt its belligerent action."

It also urged nuclear-armed North Korea to "fully abide by the terms of the Armistice Agreement" that ended the Korean War of 1950-53.

"The United States is firmly committed to the defence of our ally, the Republic of (South) Korea, and to the maintenance of regional peace and stability," it said.

Condemnation of Pyongyang's action also came from Russia, Japan and Western Europe.

China -- North Korea's sole major ally and economic prop --, while expressing concern over the cross-border firing, appealed for stalled six-party nuclear talks to resume.

In one of the most serious border incidents since the 1950-53 war, South Korean troops fired back with cannon, the Seoul government convened in an underground war room and "multiple" air force jets scrambled.

Pyongyang however said South Korea fired first in Tuesday's cross-border artillery duel, which killed two marines and injured 18 soldiers or civilians on a South Korean border island.

Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan, whose country has long had difficult relations with the reclusive communist state, ordered his government to prepare for any eventuality.

"I ordered (ministers) to make preparations so that we can react firmly, should any unexpected event occur," Kan told reporters after an emergency meeting of cabinet members and senior officials.

"I ordered them to do their utmost to gather information."

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov condemned the shelling, warning of "colossal danger" from Korean tensions and calling for an end to any hostilities.

"This could degenerate into military actions. This is a colossal danger which we need to avoid with all possible means," he said.

British Foreign Secretary William Hague slammed what he called Pyongyang's "unprovoked attack", saying it would lead to further tensions on the peninsula.

"The UK strongly condemns North Korea's unprovoked attack on the South Korean island of Yeonpyeong Island. Such unprovoked attacks will only lead to further tensions on the Korean peninsula," Hague said.

German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle warned the incident threatened peace in the region.



This picture taken by a South Korean tourist shows huge plumes of smoke rising from Yeonpyeong island in the disputed waters of the Yellow Sea yesterday. North Korea fired dozens of artillery shells onto a South Korean island, killing two people, setting homes ablaze and triggering an exchange of fire as the South's military went on top alert. PHOTO: AFP

"I am very worried by the North Korean artillery fire on South Korea. This new military provocation threatens peace in the region," he said.

And EU chief diplomat Catherine Ashton joined in the condemnation, urging the communist regime to refrain from actions that could escalate tensions.

"I am deeply concerned by today's events on the Korean Peninsula, which have reportedly led to casualties among South Korean military and civilians," Ashton said in a statement.

"I call on the North Korean authorities to refrain from any action that risks further escalation and to fully respect the Korean Armistice Agreement."

Tuesday's incident came after nuclear-armed North Korea disclosed an apparently operational uranium enrichment programme -- a second potential way of building an atomic bomb -- causing serious alarm for the US and its allies.

A long-running, but currently stalled, six-nation negotiation process hosted by China and including both Korea, the United States, Japan and Russia, is seeking to shut down the North's nuclear weapons programme.

China, the reclusive communist regime's only major ally, expressed concern over the artillery incident.

"We have taken note of the relevant report and we

express concern over the situation," foreign ministry spokesman Hong Lei told reporters.

"We hope the relevant parties do more to contribute to peace and stability on the Korean peninsula."

Hong said it was "imperative" the six-nation talks were restarted "as soon as possible".

"It is China's consistent and firm position to realise de-nuclearisation on the (Korean) peninsula through dialogue and consultation," Hong said.

North Korea abandoned the forum in April 2009, a month before its second nuclear test, and announced in September last year it had reached the final stage of enriching uranium.

Obama to get new update on North's showdown

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Barack Obama was shortly due to get a fresh intelligence update on the crisis sparked by North Korea's artillery barrage against a South Korean island, officials said yesterday.

Obama, who was roused at 3:55 am (0855 GMT) by his national security advisor Tom Donilon to be told of the incident, was to be brought up to date on the situation during his daily intelligence briefing, an official said.

The president was then due to head off as planned with Vice President Joe Biden on a trip to a Chrysler auto transmission plant in the state of Indiana.

Earlier, White House press secretary Robert Gibbs issued a statement condemning North Korea's actions and reiterating the firm American commitment to the defense of South Korea.

In one of the most serious border incidents since the 1950-53 Korean war, North Korea targeted a South Korean island, prompting Seoul's military to go on top alert.

Nato condemned on Tuesday North Korea's shelling of a South Korean island, and the 28-nation Western military alliance said it was monitoring the situation with "deep concern."

"Nato strongly condemns the North Korean shelling of a South Korean island and its resulting casualties," NATO spokeswoman Carmen Romero told AFP.

Graft row threatens Indian PM legacy, exposes weakness

NEWS ANALYSIS

REUTERS, New Delhi

A widening corruption scandal has undermined India's weak political system, hampering strong policymaking.

In the rough and tumble of Indian politics, Singh has struggled to find his way, his office undermined by a complex leadership structure with his Congress party boss Sonia Gandhi at the top, and the compulsions of coalition politics.

His only comments on the brewing scandal are telling: "As prime minister I sometimes feel like a high school student going from one test to another."

While the row over the granting of telecom licences that prompted Telecoms Minister Andimuthu Raja's exit does not threaten the government's survival, it underscored the fragility of a fickle coalition despite the Congress party's overwhelming re-election in 2009.

At stake is not only the image of the Congress party, but the political legacy of an honest, erudite prime minister who stands accused by the opposition of tolerating corruption.

Low prices to companies of selling licences at deliberately low prices to companies, some of which were ineligible, a charge he denies. The opposition says Singh turned a blind eye because Raja was from a political party necessary for government survival.

"The whole controversy affects his (Singh's) incorruptible image," said VB Singh, honorary fellow at Centre for Study of Developing Societies, a New Delhi-based think tank.

"Though it affects the Congress much more, it also drags in the prime minister's name."

The scandal has also weakened Singh's ability to move key economic reforms through parliament, further pushing back a series of reforms including introducing comprehensive tax reforms and open-



Manmohan Singh

ing up the retail sector to foreign companies.

No major reforms were expected this session but the government planned to pass a banking laws amendment bill, which would improve the capital raising capacity of India's biggest commercial lender and strengthen central bank regulatory powers.

Analysts now expect the government to struggle in the rest of its second term in office to regain momentum and push through controversial political and economic reforms, like modernising British colonial-era labour laws and opening up the financial sector.

ARELUCTANT PRIME MINISTER
Singh's reputation was forged in his time as finance minister in the 1990s, when he pushed through a series of economic reforms, which set the stage for India's subsequent boom and entry onto the world stage as a rising economic power.

Then in 2008, Singh, put his job on the line to secure parliamentary approval for a civilian nuclear deal with the United States, a rare act of toughness from the soft-spoken 78-year-old leader.

But he had seemed an unlikely choice for prime minister, thrust into the limelight only because Sonia turned down the top job after winning elections in 2004.

Time and again, Singh, an Oxbridge-trained eminent economist, seemed dwarfed by Sonia. And constant coalition-juggling with fickle allies has also distracted from strong governance. Singh is dependent on Raja's party DMK for parliamentary majority.

Each time there is a crisis, veteran politician Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee comes to the rescue. He is now trying to get opposition parties to end the parliamentary deadlock.

"They say nice men finish second - this applies to Singh. He is just too nice to be able to stop allies or inept ministers from running amok," said political commentator Amulya Ganguli.

But much of Singh's rule has been marked by a sense of policy drift, often capitulating under opposition pressure or street protests on issues ranging from freeing farm and diesel prices to pushing through tax reforms.

Add to that a series of corruption scandals, infighting between coalition partners and a more assertive opposition and Singh has largely been on the defensive in his second term of office, which is almost sure to be his last as prime minister.

The Congress party has pledged to crack down on graft, but it has been put on the defensive in recent weeks when it was forced to fire three senior officials over corruption allegations, including the problem-riddled Commonwealth Games.

Sonia and her son Rahul, seen as the next prime minister, have said conspicuously little on corruption, clearly seeking to stay away from any controversy as the Congress party prepares for a time after Singh.

Many put down Singh's shortcomings to lack of political acumen, though abroad he is much respected by world leaders. The grey bearded, bespectacled leader has never won an election and sits in the mostly nominated upper house of parliament.

Critics say his career, including as UN civil servant and government bureaucrat, underline a life where career advancement has carried more weight than pursuing strong political ideals.

PM defended in SC AG to court: PM had made all efforts to deal with the complaint

AFP, New Delhi

India's attorney general appeared before the country's Supreme Court yesterday to defend Prime Minister Manmohan Singh against allegations he had failed to act over a massive telecom corruption scam.

GE Vahanvati told the judges Singh "had made all efforts to deal with the complaint" after the court asked the premier to explain delays in resolving an opposition request to prosecute the minister involved.

India's chief auditing body last week declared the sale of 2G telecom licences by former telecom minister A. Raja had lost the country up to 40 billion dollars.

Raja, who resigned on November 14, is accused of selling the licences in 2007-08 to favoured bidders for a fraction of their true value.

Singh has not been accused of benefiting from any alleged graft, but under Indian law the premier must approve criminal proceedings against any cabinet member.

Vahanvati told the court that the complaint lodged by opposition MP Subramanian Swamy against Raja was "misconceived in law".

Swamy wrote to the prime minister in 2008 demanding that Raja was investigated and prosecuted, but Swamy said he received a reply only in March this year saying no probe would be launched.

India's main opposition party on Tuesday vowed to keep the national parliament deadlocked until the government agreed to a cross-party probe into the allegations.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and other opposition groups have forced constant adjournments in parliament for two weeks as Singh has come under increasing pressure over his handling of the scandal.

Obama's 2012 re-election prospects uncertain: Survey

REUTERS, Washington

President Barack Obama faces uncertain prospects for re-election in 2012 as many voters question whether he deserves a second term, a new poll said on Monday.

The Quinnipiac University poll said American voters by 49 percent to 43 percent do not think Obama has earned a second four-year term, and they put him in a statistical dead heat with potential Republican challengers Mitt Romney and Mike Huckabee.

Obama has struggled to bring down the stubbornly high US jobless rate of 9.6 percent and his Democrats sustained huge losses in November 2 congressional elections.

At this point, Obama leads possible Republican challenger Sarah Palin by 48 percent to 40 percent, the poll found.

Climate pledges fall short, says UN

BBC ONLINE

The promises countries have made to control carbon emissions will see temperatures rise by up to 4C during this century, a UN report concludes.

The report, from the UN Environment Programme (Unep), comes days before the opening of this year's climate summit.

It concludes there is a significant gap between what science says is necessary to constrain temperature rise and what governments have pledged to achieve.

But with extra political will, it says, warming could be kept much lower.

On Sunday, scientists released data showing that the recession carbon emissions from fossil-fuel burning by only 1.3% during 2009, and that they are set to begin rising again as the global economy cranks up once more.

Unep's analysis shows that even if governments implement all they have pledged to do, that would "...imply a temperature increase of between 2.5-5C [from pre-industrial times] before the end of the century".

As the global average temperature is already about 0.7C above pre-industrial times, this implies that anything up to 4C during the coming century is possible.

FORWARD CLIPPING
"There is a gap between the science and current ambition levels," acknowledged Achim Steiner, Unep's executive director. "But what this report shows is that the options on the table right now in the negotiations can get us almost 60% of the way there."

"This is a good first step."

Over the past year, Unep has pulled together projections from a number of research centres that model climate trends. All using different methodologies; and although the results tend to be fairly consistent, Unep wanted to meld them into a more coherent whole that could inform negotiators who will shortly be flying into Cancun, Mexico, for the climate summit.

Putin warns tigers 'close to catastrophe'

AFP, Saint Petersburg

The plight of the world's last wild tigers "is close to catastrophe", Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin yesterday told an unprecedented summit aiming to save the animal from extinction.

He said that the world's population of wild tigers had declined by a factor of 30 over the last century to 3,200 individuals while their habitat area was only seven percent of what it was before.

"The situation of the tiger is close to catastrophe," Putin told the global tiger summit in Saint Petersburg, the first ever meeting of world leaders devoted to saving the fabled beast.

"It is a tragic and deplorable result," said the Russian strongman, who has personally championed protecting Russia's remaining population of wild tigers in its Far East.

Putin underlined the importance of the meeting, which aims to agree a global programme pledging to double the numbers of tigers in the wild by 2022.

23 BDR men jailed

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court that sent them to custody, said a BDR official.

In the case statement, the complainant alleged the BDR men revolted against their officers and took control of the battalion headquarters on February 26, 2009. They also vandalised the headquarters and fired at least 150 blank shots.

Of the convicts, four BDR men -- Nizam Uddin, Sirazul Haque, Shahadat Hossain and Abdur Rahman -- were jailed for one year, eight -- Sameul Islam, Toslur Rahman, Asaduzzaman, Motiur Rahman, Joyal Abedin, Dulal Hossain, Parvez Alam and Abul Kalam Azad -- one year and six months, Mohabbat Ali and Tariqul Islam two years, Kamor Uddin two years and six months while Pronayam Chakma and Nazrul Islam for five years.

Of the other six, Amir Hossain and Ashraf Huda got nine months' jail term, Rokon Khalasi six months, Nazmul Shahadat four years, Habibur Rahman one year and three months while Yusuf Ali four months.

The court acquitted Abu Siddique, as his involvement in the mutiny was not proved.

Earlier BDR jwans Nizam Uddin, Samedul Islam, Yusuf Ali, Sirajul Haque, Toslur Rahman, Asaduzzaman, Motiur Rahman, Nazmul Shahadat, Habibur Rahman, Joyal Abedin, Ashraf Huda, Rokon, Dulal Hossain, Abu

Bakkar, Shahadat Hossain, Amir Hossain and Abdur Rahman confessed to their involvement in the mutiny while the rest seven, Parvez Hasan, Kamor Uddin, Abu Siddique, Nazrul Islam, Pronayam Chakma, Mohabbat Ali and Tariqul Islam, claimed innocence, a BDR official said.

Meanwhile, the Special Court-10 yesterday read out individual charges against another 131 accused jawans of BDR hospital unit of at Pilkhana.

With this, the court at the Pilkhana Darbar Hall has so far completed reading out individual charges against 230, out of total 256 accused jawans of the unit. It read out the charges against 99 accused on Monday.

The charges include leaving the Darbar Hall defying the orders of the then BDR director general, establishing control over the subordinates at the BDR hospital, not informing the higher authorities about the mutiny, not taking any steps to prevent the mutiny and grabbing arms and ammunition from the armouries.

The three-member court headed by Col Khondokar Obaydul Ahsan adjourned the trial proceedings till 10:00am today.

Seventy-four people including 57 army officers were killed during the carnage on February 25-26 last year at the Pilkhana headquarters.

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