

China-US row over N Korea as tensions rise

BBC ONLINE

China has hit back at US comments criticising Beijing for not reining in its North Korean ally, saying military threats cannot resolve tensions on the Korean peninsula.

Earlier, top US military official Adm Mike Mullen said China was "enabling" North Korea's "reckless behaviour".

Meanwhile, China's top diplomat has met North Korean leader Kim Jong-il in Pyongyang, amid rising tensions.

State media said they "reached a consensus", but gave no details.

The US has been putting pressure on China to intervene after North Korea shelled the South Korean island of Yeonpyeong, near a disputed sea border, killing four people.

South Korea threatened to mount air strikes on the North if it carried out further attacks.

'VOLATILITY'

"I actually believe that because these provocations continue, and seemingly at a more frequent interval, that the danger is going up and that steps must be taken to ensure that they stop," said Adm Mullen at a news conference in Tokyo.

"Much of that volatility is owed to the reckless behaviour of the North Korean regime, enabled by their friends in China," he said.

"There is too much at stake for this sort of myopia."

Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Jiang Yu told a news conference that she questioned what Adm Mullen had done for "peace and stability in the region".

She called his remarks on China's support for North Korea an "accusation".

A senior team of US diplomats is to visit Beijing next week for further talks about the tensions sparked by the shelling.

China, which supplies food and fuel to North Korea, has so far refused to condemn the attack on Yeonpyeong, the first attack of its kind on South Korean civilians since the Korean War ended in a ceasefire in 1953.

China fought on North Korea's side during the war.

Adm Mullen also called on Japan, the US and South Korea to stand together against North Korea.

"I do have a real sense of urgency about addressing the potential in terms of the Korean peninsula that is much better addressed with all of us together, in terms of showing strength and getting to a point where we can deter North Korean behaviour," he said.

Both Japan and South Korea have carried out joint military exercises with the US in the past few weeks.

China has criticised those exercises as an attempt at US containment in an area Beijing sees as its own responsibility.

Adm Mullen said South Korea needed to respond to moves by the North with restraint.

'MOCKED'

North Korea has been defending its shelling of Yeonpyeong as a response to extensive live-fire from the South.

It accused Seoul and Washington of "persistently escalating tension", adding that South Korea had "persistently mocked at the (North's) sincere efforts to improve the inter-Korean relations and turned away their faces from them".

S Korea says reunification with North not long off

AP, Seoul

South Korea's president has declared that the reunification of Korea is drawing near -- a surprising statement at a time of soaring tensions on the divided peninsula.

While a single Korea is the stated goal of both the communist North and the democratic South, it has seemed a faraway dream this year, which saw an alleged North Korean attack on a South Korean warship, an announcement by Pyongyang that it is expanding its nuclear programs and, most recently, the shelling of a South Korean island two weeks ago.

In the wake of the Nov 23 artillery assault on the South's Yeonpyeong Island, both sides have raised the temperature on the peninsula by trading angry barbs and threats of retribution. South Korean President Lee Myung-bak has not shied away from tough rhetoric, as he looked to deflect criticism that his military's response to the shelling was too weak.

But twice this week, during a trip to Malaysia, he has expressed optimism that reunification is not long off.

"North Korea now remains one of the most belligerent nations in the world," Lee said in the interview published Friday in The Star, a Malaysian newspaper. But, he added, it's a "fact that the two Koreas will have to coexist peacefully and, in the end, realize reunification."

Clashes as UK parliament votes for student fee rise

REUTERS, London

Protesters attacked government buildings and damaged a car carrying Prince Charles after parliament voted on Thursday to raise fees paid by university students in a vote which divided Britain's coalition government.

The move to shift the burden of paying for university teaching from state to student is the first test of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition's intent to push through austerity cuts as it tries to erase a record budget deficit.

It provoked fury from young protesters who have staged a series of demonstrations in recent weeks. Analysts say the seven-month-old coalition will hold together, but could come under increasing strain as cuts bite harder next year.

Some protesters attacked a limousine taking Charles and his wife Camilla to a London theater. The car was splattered with paint and a window was cracked, but the couple were unhurt.

Protesters laid siege to the finance ministry close to parliament, battering open a door and chanting "we want our money back" as they clashed with riot police on the threshold of the building.

They later smashed shop windows in Oxford Street, one of the main shopping streets in the capital. Mounted police were used earlier to try to disperse protesters outside parliament.

Prime Minister David Cameron condemned the violence.

"It is clear that a minority of protesters came determined to provoke violence, attack the police and cause as much damage to property as possible," he said.

"It is shocking and regrettable that the car carrying the Prince of Wales (Prince Charles) and the Duchess of Cornwall was caught up and attacked in the violence," he added.

The clashes were the worst political violence in London since a mass riot in 1990 over a local tax which helped to end to Conservative leader Margaret Thatcher's

decade in power.

Analysts said there could be more to come as hundreds of thousands of public sector workers lose their jobs.

"There will probably be serious injuries if not deaths if this level of protest is replicated in the new year by militant unions," said Carina O'Reilly, European security analyst with IHS Jane's.

REDUCED MAJORITY

Twenty-two people were arrested and 10 policemen suffered injuries. A Reuters photographer was taken to hospital after he was hit in the face by a rock.

Police said tens of thousands joined the protests, including groups of hooded and masked youths who were at the center of the violence. Police had warned that, like in previous student demonstrations, violent groups could hijack the rallies.

The lower house of parliament approved the plan by a majority of 21 votes, with 27 members of the coalition parties voting against and a handful abstaining.



PHOTO: AFP

US President Barack Obama waves alongside music legend BB King during the National Christmas Tree Lighting ceremony on the Ellipse near the White House in Washington, DC, on Thursday.

ON WIKILEAKS

Assange moved to isolation in jail

AFP, London

Police moved WikiLeaks chief Julian Assange to the segregation unit of a London jail for his safety, his lawyer said yesterday as new cables showed the US suspects Myanmar has a secret nuclear programme.

The 39-year-old Australian has been moved from the main part of Wandsworth prison to an isolation unit, said Jennifer Robinson, one of Assange's legal team.

"The prison authorities are doing it for his own safety, presumably," she told AFP.

Assange is due to appear in a London court for a second time on Tuesday after being arrested on a warrant issued by Sweden, where prosecutors want to question him about allegations of rape

and sexual molestation made by two women.

WikiLeaks insists the allegations are politically motivated because the whistleblowing website has enraged Washington and governments around the world by releasing thousands of US diplomatic cables.

Robinson complained that Assange "does not get any recreation" in the prison and "has difficulties getting phone calls out...he is on his own."

Assange, a former computer hacker, is not allowed to have a laptop computer in his cell, but his lawyers have requested one.

"Obviously we are trying to prepare a legal appeal and he has difficulties hand writing, so it would be much easier in order to assist us in the preparation if he had a laptop," Robinson said.

LATEST LEAKS

All of Cuba's major economic partners, except for Venezuela, worry the Communist island nation's economy could collapse within two years.

China is fed up with the "foot-dragging" of the military junta in Myanmar on reform and fears the ruling generals can no longer protect its interests in the country.

Washington has suspected for years that Myanmar has a secret nuclear programme supported by North Korea, with witnesses reporting suspicious activity as far back as 2004.

Australia's former prime minister Kevin Rudd confessed that the bloody conflict in Afghanistan "scares the hell out of" him.

Chinese officials reacted furiously to Australia's plans to expand its defence force in part to counter the Asian giant's growing military presence.

Egypt's 82-year-old President Hosni Mubarak, in power since 1981, is likely to seek re-election next year and serve for the rest of his life, and the vote will not be free or fair.

US pharmaceutical giant Pfizer sought damaging information against Nigeria's ex-attorney general to pressure him into dropping lawsuits over a drug trial.

Washington has suspected for years that Myanmar has a secret nuclear programme supported by North Korea, with witnesses reporting suspicious activity as far back as 2004, leaked memos show.

SOURCE: AFP

Pak media retract fake leak story

AFP, Islamabad

Leading Pak newspapers yesterday retracted an explosive story that used fake US diplomatic cables to brand Indian generals "genocidal" and accuse New Delhi of sponsoring militants.

The News claimed on Thursday that cables showed Indian spies were supporting Islamist militants in Pakistan's Waziristan and Baluchistan.



PHOTO: AFP

People rally in support of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange in Sydney yesterday.

WikiLeaks supporters mull change in tactics

BBC ONLINE

Web attacks carried out in support of Wikileaks are being wound down as activists consider changing tactics.

Attacks against Amazon were called off late on 9 December and re-directed towards net payments firm Paypal.

Analysis suggests the earlier attacks were made more effective by the involvement of hi-tech criminals.

At the same time one wing of the activist group suggested ditching the attacks and doing more to publicise what is in the leaked cables.

SITESAVING

The attacks have been carried out using a tool, called LOIC, that allows people to bombard a site of their choosing with data or let the target be chosen by those running the Anonymous campaign.

The tool launches what is known as a distributed denial of service (DDoS) attack which tries to knock a website offline by bombarding it with so much data that it cannot respond.

The LOIC tool has been downloaded more than 46,000 times but, said Anonymous activists in a tweet, this did not translate into enough people using it to knock the retail giant off the web.

Instead, the attack was re-directed towards Paypal and its computer systems which, according to a status page, has intermittently suffered "performance issues" ever since.

Early on 10 December Moneybookers was chosen as the next target and its site was occasionally unreachable from about 1100 GMT.

The chances of success could be boosted by a new version of LOIC written in web programming language Javascript that allows anyone with a browser, including on a mobile phone, to launch attacks.

US 'loses track' of 119,000 planes

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

The US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) is missing key information on who owns one-third of the 357,000 private and commercial aircraft in the US, a gap the agency says could be exploited by terrorists and drug traffickers.

The records are in such disarray that the FAA says it is worried that criminals could buy planes without the government's knowledge, or use the registration numbers of other aircraft to evade new computer systems designed to track suspicious flights.

Next year the FAA will begin canceling the registration certificates of all 357,000 aircraft and require owners to register anew, the Associated Press news agency cited them as saying on Friday.

About 119,000 of the aircraft on the US registry have "questionable registration" because of missing forms, invalid addresses, unreported sales or other paperwork problems, according to the FAA.

In many cases, the FAA cannot say who owns a plane or even whether it is still flying or is no longer functional.

"We have identified some potential risk areas, but I think we're trying to eliminate as much risk as possible through the re-registration process," Laura Brown, an FAA spokeswoman, said.

US, Gulf states agree on approach to Iran: Gates

AFP, Aboard A Us Military Aircraft

Countries in the Gulf share the US view on the threat posed by Iran's nuclear program and support an approach focused on sanctions against Tehran, US Defense Secretary Robert Gates said yesterday.

"I think there is general support in the region for applying the sanctions and for doing what we can to make the sanctions effective, in trying to influence the Iranian government to walk away from their nuclear weapons program," Gates told reporters on his plane after a visit to the region.

Gates visited the United Arab Emirates and Oman this week after revelations in leaked US diplomatic cables showing Gulf leaders alarmed over Iran's nuclear work and its assertive role in region, with some demanding that Washington take military action.

The defense secretary has argued that sanctions are beginning to take a toll on Iran while warning repeatedly that a military strike would at best only delay a nuclear program for a few years while rallying the population behind the leadership.

Across the Gulf, "there clearly is concern about Iran's overall aggressive behavior with respect to Hezbollah and Lebanon and other places around the world," he said.

The United States has favored the approach to Iran but refused to rule out a military strike, while Israel has made clear it is prepared to take action to prevent Tehran from attaining an atomic bomb.

Israel has publicly voiced its worries over Tehran's uranium enrichment work but Arab leaders in the Gulf have kept their views mostly private, until the WikiLeaks website exposed their fixation with Iran by publishing a trove of secret US diplomatic files.

Gates, heading back to Washington, met Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahayan on Thursday and held talks with the sultan of Oman over the weekend in Muscat.

Recounting his meeting in the UAE capital Abu Dhabi, Gates said he had "productive" talks with Sheikh Mohammed that covered Iran, security threats out of Yemen and the war in Afghanistan.

"We obviously talked about Iran and the importance of the sanctions and keeping the diplomatic and economic pressure on," he said.

UK team claims fastest land crossing of Antarctica

BBC ONLINE

A British expedition to Antarctica says it has succeeded in establishing a new record - the fastest land crossing of the southernmost continent.

The Moon Regan Transantarctic Expedition said the 10-man team had completed the crossing in under 13 days, smashing all previous records.

The total distance covered was 1,945.9km (1209 miles) in 303 hours.

The team set off from the Union Glacier airstrip on 25 November and arrived on the Ross Ice Shelf earlier on Thursday.

A statement of the group's website said: "The team has crossed the continent! The Moon Regan Transantarctic Expedition team have just completed the fastest ever vehicle crossing of the Antarctic continent."

"The team will now retrace their tracks to the South Pole, and back to the west coast at Union Glacier. They hope to complete the return trip in around nine days; they will then be the only vehicle-based expedition ever to complete the there-and-back journey."

The team - explorers, mechanics and scientists - travelled in convoy led by a propeller-driven biofuelled scout vehicle. Two large "monster" trucks followed behind carrying most of the crew and equipment.