

# US plays down N Korea threat

## Diplomats to stay despite evacuation warning

AGENCIES

US officials yesterday played down the threat of war on the Korean peninsula, after weeks of bellicose statements from Pyongyang.

A White House spokesman said the US "would not be surprised" if North Korea launched a missile, while a top US military officer said recent threats appeared to fit a familiar pattern.

Pyongyang has threatened to attack both US and South Korean targets.

It has told foreign embassies it cannot guarantee their safety in a conflict. Diplomats in Pyongyang were asked on Friday to tell the foreign ministry by 10 April what help they would need in evacuating.

Despite the threat, foreign diplomats in North Korea appeared to be staying put.

Most of their governments made it clear they had no immediate plans to withdraw personnel, and some suggested the advisory was a ruse to fuel growing global anxiety over the current crisis on the Korean peninsula.

In South Korea, a government official was quoted by the Yonhap news agency as saying that diplomats would ignore the North's appeal to leave.

The embassy warning on Friday coincided with reports that North Korea had loaded two intermediate-range missiles on mobile launchers and hidden them in underground facilities near its east coast.

They were reported to be untested Musudan missiles which are believed to have a range of around 3,000 kilometres that could theoretically be pushed to 4,000 kilometres with a light payload.

That would cover any target in South Korea and Japan, and possibly even reach US military bases located on the Pacific island of Guam.

White House spokesman Jay Carney said Friday that Washington "would not be surprised" by a missile test, which would fit the North's "current pattern of bellicose, unhelpful and unconstructive rhetoric and actions".

North Korea, incensed by UN sanctions and South Korea-US military drills, has issued a series of apocalyptic threats of nuclear war in recent weeks.

The North has no proven inter-continental ballistic missile capability that would enable it to strike more distant US targets, and many experts say it is unlikely it can even mount a nuclear warhead on a mid-range missile.

Nevertheless, the international community is becoming increasingly skittish that, with tensions showing no sign of de-escalating, there is a real risk of the situation spiralling out of control.



## Lebanon names PM ending deadlock

AFP, Beirut

Lebanon's newly named Prime Minister Tamam Salam pledged in his first speech yesterday to safeguard the country's security from the war raging in neighbouring Syria.

"There is a need to bring Lebanon out of its state of division and political fragmentation, as reflected on the security situation, and to ward off the risks brought by the tragic situation in the neighbouring (country) and by regional tensions," Salam said.

Salam, 67, of the Western-backed opposition made the remarks in his inaugural speech shortly after being tasked by President Michel Sleiman with forming a new government.

His appointment comes two weeks after Najib Mikati resigned and effectively brought down this Hezbollah-dominated government.

Salam also pledged to work with all groups across Lebanon's political spectrum, which is split into pro- and anti-Damascus camps.

Lebanon was dominated politically and militarily by Syria until 2005, and the regime of President Bashar al-Assad still holds sway over Beirut through Hezbollah and other allies.



## THE FADED PAST OF AFGHANISTAN

Three Afghan men sit in front of the destroyed Darul Aman palace, faded through time, in Kabul yesterday. Nestling beneath the mountains that ring Kabul, the shattered shell of the Darul Aman palace stands in mute testimony to the brutality and callousness of Afghanistan's history of conflict.

PHOTO: AFP

# Fall of regime will cause regional instability

*Says Assad; Obama to host ME talks on Syria*

AFP, Damascus

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has warned that the fall of his regime would destabilise the region "for many years", as US President Barack Obama announced talks with Middle East allies over the crisis.

"The whole world knows that

if Syria is partitioned, or if terrorist forces take control of the country, there will be direct contagion of the surrounding countries," Assad said in an interview with two Turkish media outlets, video of which was posted on his Facebook page Friday.

"Then there would be a domino effect on countries perhaps far from the Middle East, to the west, east, north and south. This would mean instability for many years, even decades."

With ongoing battles between rebels and regime forces and a deepening humanitarian crisis, the White House



Bashar al-Assad

announced Friday that Obama would host regional leaders from Jordan, Turkey, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates in the coming weeks to discuss the situation, now in its third year.

The US administration said Obama would meet with Jordan's King Abdullah II on April 26, and with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan on May 16.

Turkey and Jordan have strongly backed the two-year-old revolt against Assad, and both countries host large numbers of Syrian refugees.

Obama's round of talks will also include Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahayan of the United Arab Emirates on April 16, and Qatar's emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani on April 23.

The UN says more than 70,000 people have been killed in a spiralling war that broke out in March 2011.

# Mandela discharged from hospital

AFP, Johannesburg

Nelson Mandela was discharged from hospital yesterday after a 10-day stay during which the 94-year-old anti-apartheid icon was treated for pneumonia, the South African government said.

His release was decided "following a sustained and gradual improvement in his general condition," presidency spokesman Mac Maharaj said in a statement.

Shortly later, an ambulance and black security vehicle arrived at the Johannesburg home of the frail former president, where the government said he will continue to receive "high care."

Mandela was rushed to hospital before midnight on March 27, suffering from a recurrence of a lung infection.

Doctors, who later said the infection was pneumonia, drained a build-up of fluid, known as a pleural effusion or "water on the lungs", that had developed.

His release will come as a relief to millions of South Africans who regard him as the father of democracy in their country.

It was the third time in five months that the former president has been hospitalised.



Nelson Mandela

A Saudi girl drives an ATV (all-terrain vehicle) with a younger sister at Thumamah Park near Riyadh on Friday. Saudi Arabia's religious police have lifted a ban on women riding bicycles and motorbikes, but only in recreational areas and while dressed in full Islamic veil and accompanied by a male relative, local media reported.

PHOTO: AFP



# Corruption a threat to democracy: Pranab

IANS, New Delhi

Corruption is a threat to the democratic fabric of the country and frustrates efforts to bring equity, President Pranab Mukherjee said here yesterday, delivering the 14th DP Kohli Memorial Lecture organised by the CBI.

The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) was founded by D.P. Kohli, who served as its director from 1963-68. The agency enters its golden jubilee year this year.

The president said the government should work to make healthcare more affordable. The title of the president's address was "Good governance: Empowering Institutions, Society and Public".

The president said the country was at a crossroads, and could not lose the momentum of change. He said basic principles of good governance had already

been incorporated into the constitution by the nation's founding fathers.

"Good governance means existence of elaborate architecture that has the good of the people as the only focus," the President said.

Noting that the root of poor governance was lethargy (in response) to change, he said "good governance should be our unwavering goal."

The president said that though India had made development strides, it ranked lower than major developed economies in parameters such as government effectiveness.

He said the direct benefit scheme would help bring greater transparency.

"Corruption is a threat to the democratic fabric... It frustrates efforts to bring equity," the president said.

Complimenting the CBI on its work, he said it was the "most sought after agency for investigation" by every section of society.

# Miniskirt ban to protect decency!

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

Uganda is considering extraordinary measures against women's rights that would lead to arrests for those wearing skirts above the knee in public.

The proposed law would mark a return to the era of dictator Idi Amin, who banned short skirts by decree. Many Ugandans are opposed to the idea and it has spawned a Twitter hashtag, #SaveMiniSkirt.

The government-backed bill would also see many films and TV dramas banned and personal internet use closely monitored by officials.

Simon Lokodo, Uganda's ethics and integrity minister, defended the plans. "It's outlawing any indecent dressing including miniskirts," he said.

"Any attire which exposes intimate parts of the human body, especially areas that are of erotic function, are outlawed. Anything above the knee is outlawed. If a woman wears a miniskirt, we will arrest her."

He said inappropriate contents on TV and internet will also come under hammer.

"A lot of photos, television, films will be outlawed. Even on the internet, we're going to put a monitoring system so we know who has watched which website."



# Obama says sorry for 'sexist' remark

CNN ONLINE

A day after causing a stir by calling Indian-American Kamala Harris as "by far the best-looking attorney general", President Barack Obama apologised to her for remarks that some branded sexist.

Obama spoke to California's top law officer Thursday night after he came back from his trip to the state where he made the "offending" remark at a fundraiser for his Democratic Party Thursday.

"She's brilliant and she's dedicated, she's tough... She also happens to be, by far, the best looking attorney general," Obama said according to a transcript provided by the White House only to cause a nationwide flutter among the chatterati.

"The president did speak with Attorney General (Kamala) Harris last night after he came back from his trip," White House Press Secretary Jay Carney told reporters Friday. "He called her to apologise for the distraction created by his comments."

"They are old friends and good friends and he did not want in any way to diminish the attorney general's professional accomplishments and her capabilities, and I would note that he called her in those same comments brilliant, dedicated and tough.



Obama with Kamala Harris.

She is all those things," Carney said.

Obama "fully recognizes the challenges women continue to face in the workplace," he added.

Harris, 48, daughter of an Indian mother and an African-American father, became the first woman and first Indian-American to be elected as California's top law official in 2010, after serving as district attorney in San Francisco.

A rising star of Democratic Party, she has a law degree from the University of California and went to college at Howard. Her tenure in law enforcement has included a tough stance on hate crimes, and the unusual prosecution of parents of truant children.

Obama should have focused on those attributes rather than her looks, critics said.

# WikiLeaks unveils Aussie poll plans

AFP, Sydney

Whistleblowing group WikiLeaks yesterday unveiled plans to field candidates in at least three states in Australia's elections and said it would be "embarrassing" if Julian Assange won but couldn't take his seat.

Assange, Australian-born founder of the controversial WikiLeaks site, announced that he would run for the Senate last year and is pushing ahead with the plan despite being holed up in the Ecuadorian embassy in London since June.

Greg Barns, a lawyer who is Assange's newly-appointed campaign director, said the WikiLeaks Party had secured candidates to run in at least three states when Australia goes to the polls on September 14.

Aside from Assange, who is expected to be on the upper house ticket for the state of Victoria, Barns said WikiLeaks would present several other "high quality candidates" including a state running mate for the WikiLeaks chief.

That would allow the party to take the Victoria seat even if Assange, who sought Ecuadorian asylum in a bid to dodge extradition to Sweden where he is wanted over sex crime allegations, is unable to return to Australia.

Britain refused to grant Assange safe passage out of the country, leaving him stranded in Ecuador's London embassy, and Australia — his place of birth — has been outspoken about his whistleblowing activities.

Despite the swirl of allegations against him, the WikiLeaks founder is a popular figure in Australia.

## Iran nuke talks fail to break impasse

AFP, Almaty

Iran and world powers yesterday failed to break the deadlock in the crisis over Tehran's nuclear drive, with the EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton saying the positions were still "far apart".

After two days of exhausting diplomacy in the Kazakh city of Almaty, no new date was agreed for the resumption of talks searching for an elusive breakthrough after more than a decade of tensions.

The world powers had offered some easing of the sanctions that have hurt Iran's economy in the past two years, in return for Tehran accepting limits on its nuclear programme.

But speaking after the talks wrapped up, Ashton admitted that the world powers were still waiting to see "real engagement" from Iran over the proposal.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said the two sides had failed to find "mutual understanding", and that a time and place for the next talks remained to be agreed, in comments quoted by Russian news agencies.

Ashton said the sides had decided to go back to their capitals to discuss what to do next and promised that she would be in touch with chief Iranian nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili.

Ashton represents the world powers -- comprised of the five permanent UN Security Council members and Germany and known collectively as the P5+1 -- as chief negotiator.

## Blast kills 3 Nato soldiers in Afghanistan

AFP, Kandahar

A Taliban car bomb struck a Nato military convoy yesterday, killing three foreign soldiers and two coalition civilian workers in the deadliest attack on Western forces this year.

The blast occurred in the Zabul province, where American and Romanian troops are based, according to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which did not disclose the nationalities of the soldiers in line with policy.

An ISAF spokesman in Kabul confirmed the blast was a car bomb targeting a military patrol, adding that there were also Afghan civilian casualties.