

China, US pledge joint efforts

AFP, Beijing

The top Chinese and US diplomats yesterday pledged to work together to resolve the crisis on the Korean peninsula, where tensions are at fever pitch and Pyongyang has threatened nuclear war.

Over a long day of diplomacy in Beijing, Kerry, who arrived in China yesterday, warned Chinese leaders including President Xi Jinping that the stakes were high as China's erratic ally North Korea threatens a missile launch that would extend a weeks-long crisis.

The region has been engulfed by threats of nuclear war by Pyongyang in response to UN sanctions imposed over its recent rocket and nuclear tests, and Kerry stressed that China has a unique sway over North Korea.

"To properly address the Korean nuclear issue serves the common interests of all parties," China's State Councillor Yang Jiechi said ahead of a formal dinner with visiting US

KOREA CRISIS



John Kerry (L) shakes hands with Xi Jinping in Beijing yesterday.

Secretary of State John Kerry.

"It is also the shared responsibility of all parties," added Yang, who is in charge of Beijing's foreign policy. "China will work with other relevant parties including the United States to play a constructive role," he said.

China has backed North Korea since the end of the Korean War in 1953 and is its sole major ally and the provider of the vast majority of its trade and aid.

Kerry earlier pressed Beijing to use

its leverage with Pyongyang to try to calm the crisis.

"China and the United States must together take steps in order to achieve the goal of a denuclearised Korean peninsula," he said.

But there was no sign in public of China endorsing a get-tough approach towards North Korea, with its top diplomat going no further than agreeing with Kerry to pursue a deeper dialogue.

North Korean television yesterday made no mention of Kerry's visit and devoted most of its reports to preparations for tomorrow's celebrations marking the birth date of state founder Kim Il-Sung.

Observers believe a launch is most likely in the build-up to the anniversary.

Intelligence officials in Seoul say the North, as a show of force, has two mid-range missiles ready for imminent launch from its east coast, and South Korea and Japan are on heightened alert for any test.

Russia bars 18 US officials over rights row

AFP, Moscow

Russia yesterday published its own blacklist of US officials banned from entering the country in retaliation for Washington blocking 18 Russians over alleged human rights abuses.

"The war of lists is not our choice, but we cannot ignore outright black-mail," said the Russian foreign ministry in a statement, which includes a list of 18 US officials "implicated in human rights violations."

On Friday the US Treasury released a list barring 16 Russians allegedly linked to the death of jailed human rights lawyer Sergei Magnitsky, as well as two Chechens tied to other alleged rights abuses, from travelling to the US or holding assets there under the 2012 Sergei Magnitsky Act.

The foreign ministry yesterday called the Magnitsky Act an "absurd" law that "intervenes in our domestic affairs" and "delivers a strong blow to bilateral relations."

'They're God'

N Korea's propaganda machine grips defector 11 yrs on

CNN ONLINE

To the outside world the images from North Korean state television are nearly comical -- weeping soldiers chasing Kim Jong Un into the freezing sea, elderly women screaming as the young leader approaches, and North Koreans unleashing dogs at a poorly made effigy of a South Korean leader.

But as Chae Young Hee watches, her eyes begin to brim with tears and her lips tremble uncontrollably with national pride.

Chae is not a North Korean anymore, having defected to South Korea 11 years ago, abandoning the totalitarian regime.

In the North, she experienced starvation, the brutality of the regime and fled with her daughter in hope of a better life in the free world. But as Chae watches KCTV, the North's only television channel its citizens can view, the power of the propaganda she grew up with takes hold.

"They're God," she says, referring to North Korea's trinity, Kim Jong Un, his father Kim Jong Il, and grandfather Kim Il Sung.

The tears are now running down Chae's perfectly made up face and she chokes back a sob. "I can feel the pull in my heart".

"I know their sincerity," she says, as she watches a group of soldiers sing and sway before Kim, their faces red with emotion and streaked with tears. "This is not a lie. It is real. If anything happens, they will give up their lives. They will even jump into fire."



Psy wants his Music to spill boundary

AFP, Seoul

"Gangnam Style" star Psy said he and 50,000 fans would give a "shout out" to the people of North Korea at his concert yesterday when he unveils the all-important dance video for his new single "Gentleman".

Describing the division of the Korean peninsula as a "tragedy", Psy said he wanted North Koreans to share in the "fun and happiness" of his music.

"Tonight me and 50,000 Korean people... we are going to sing out loud. We are going to shout out loud and we are really close to them, so they can hear," he said.

Hopefully they might enjoy it too," he added.



People fly their kites during the international kite festival in Berck-sur-Mer, northern France yesterday.



PHOTO: AFP

Libya moves to bar ex-Gaddafi officials

AFP, Tripoli

A bill banning associates of former dictator Muammar Gaddafi from politics risks inflaming tensions in Libya and could see top officials including the premier and the assembly chief removed from their posts.

The bill, first proposed in December, will target those who worked in 36 job categories during Gaddafi's four decades in power.

In its current draft, the bill could remove many of the country's new leaders from their posts, including Mohammed Megaryef, president of the General National Congress (GNC) and Libya's highest political authority, his deputy Jumaa Attiga and Prime Minister Ali Zeidan.

Observers said that the bill moved one step closer to ratification on Wednesday, when the assembly made a change to the interim constitutional declaration making it impossible to appeal the law before it is passed.

Rebels' tie with Qaeda boosts Syria regime

AFP, Beirut

The public pledge of allegiance to al-Qaeda by Syria's fiercest rebel group, Al-Nusra Front, serves the interests of President Bashar al-Assad's regime, analysts say.

"It's a point in the regime's favour because it reinforces the official narrative that claims (the army faces) terrorist groups backed by foreign forces," said Damascus Centre for Strategic Studies head Bassam Abu Abdallah.

"The opposition's stance is weakened before Syrian and international public opinion," he said.

Al-Nusra Front's chief Abu Mohammed al-Jawhani pledged allegiance on Wednesday to al-Qaeda head Ayman al-Zawahiri, who is calling for an Islamic state in Syria and the "restoration of an Islamic caliphate".

The insurgency is composed of four main elements: The mainstream Free Syrian Army, which says it is fighting to establish a democratic state, the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front, the more hardline Syrian Islamic Front, and Al-Nusra Front.

Experts say the Free Syrian Army comprises some 140,000 fighters, while Islamists number around 8,000. But the Islamists are better equipped and have impressed the population.

After Al-Nusra's pledge of allegiance, Abu Abdallah believes the regime will now go all-out on the battlefield. "It's a green light for the authorities," he said.

"The situation has become clearer. We are going to see major change on the ground, and intensified military operations to finish this group off," he added.

In combat zones across Syria, troops and rebels appear to have reached a stalemate, except in the south where insurgents are advancing.

The regime still holds the coastal areas and major cities -- barring Raqa in the north and large parts of Aleppo -- while insurgents control large swathes of northern and eastern Syria.

Militants blow up poll office in Pakistan

AFP, Miranshah, Pakistan

Militants blew up the election office of an independent candidate in northwest Pakistan yesterday, adding to security fears ahead of historic national polls next month.

No one was hurt in the bombing in Miranshah, which is the main town in North Waziristan and a known hub of Taliban and al-Qaeda-linked militants, bordering Afghanistan.

But the bombing is likely to fuel concerns that violence will mar the national and regional elections on May 11, which will mark the country's first democratic transition of power after a civilian government has served a full term in office.

Nobody immediately claimed responsibility for the attack. But Pak Taliban has made death threats against the three main secular parties that made up the outgoing government and who backed army operations against the Islamist militants.

AFP, Denpasar

A passenger jet operated by budget airline Lion Air -- which recently sealed blockbuster orders for new planes -- missed the runway at Bali airport Saturday and landed in the sea but everybody on board survived.

The Boeing jet carrying more than 100 passengers missed the runway as it came in to land in good weather conditions at Denpasar airport on the Indonesian resort island, transport ministry official Herry Bhakti told AFP.

Bhakti initially said the plane overshot the runway, but later clarified his comments to say that it



landed straight in the water.

Images of the incident site showed the plane partially submerged in the water with inflatable slides deployed from the front exits and a large crack in the fuselage towards the rear of the aircraft. Passengers in life jackets could be seen in the water.

A Lion Air spokesman said the 737-800 was carrying 101 passengers

and seven crew members. The passengers included 95 adults, five children, and one baby. Bhakti initially said it had been carrying more than 130 passengers.

He said the aircraft started operating in 2012 and was new.

The national transportation safety committee "will investigate the cause of the incident", he said.

It was not immediately clear how many people were injured in the incident or what the nationalities of the passengers were.

Bali is a hugely popular holiday destination, welcoming millions of foreign tourists from around the world every year.

Obama earnings declined as book sales slump

BBC ONLINE

US President Barack Obama made \$608,611 in 2012, down more than 20% from the year before, according to his tax documents.

The decline in his pay comes as sales of Obama's books slow. His presidential salary is \$400,000.

He and wife Michelle paid an effective tax rate of 18.4% and donated \$150,034 to 33 different charities.

Obama's tax rate will rise next year under a recent agreement with Congressional Republicans.

"Under the president's own tax proposals, including limitations on the value of tax preferences for high-income households, he would pay more in taxes while ensuring we cut taxes for the middle class and those trying to get in it," said White House press secretary Jay Carney in a statement accompanying the release of the president's and vice-president's tax returns.

Carney noted that Obama supports the so-called "Buffett Rule" -- a minimum 30 percent rate for individuals making more than a million dollars a year.

The president's earnings have declined significantly from 2009. That year, his first in office, he earned \$5.5m, mostly from sales of his books Dreams from My Father and The Audacity of Hope.

Vice-President Joe Biden and his wife Jill reported \$385,072 of income and paid \$87,851 of federal tax.



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- ▷ Do you have the option of paying only 5 – 10% booking money and rest of the amount with construction progress, so that you can stop payment for any delay in construction?
- ▷ Does your agreement incorporate this important clause - “If you fail to pay your installment for any reason, you will get 100% REFUND of your money without any deduction”?

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