

N Korea fires short-range missiles

AFP, Seoul

North Korea yesterday launched three short-range missiles into the Sea of Japan, apparently as part of a military drill, South Korea's defence ministry said.

US and South Korean forces had been on heightened alert for a medium-range ballistic missile test in recent weeks amid tensions triggered by North Korea's nuclear test in February.

"North Korea launched two guided missiles in the morning and another one in the afternoon," a defence ministry spokesman told AFP.

"The missiles landed in the East Sea (Sea of Japan)," he said.

Seoul criticised the launches, calling them "serious" provocations.

The launches followed a joint South Korea-US naval exercise this week, slammed by North Korea as a "wanton" provocation and rehearsal for war.

A US defence official said last week that two North Korean Musudan medium-range missiles that had been primed for firing as tensions flared in the run-up to the North's national celebrations on April 15 had been moved from their launch site.

Musudan missiles have an estimated range of 2,500 to 4,000 kilometres, enough to reach South Korea and Japan and potentially US military bases on the Pacific island of Guam.

US and South Korean officials had been worried that any test of the medium-range missiles would trigger a fresh surge in tensions, which escalated after the North carried out a nuclear test in February.



Activists stand on Pennsylvania Avenue during a protest outside of the White House on Friday in Washington on the 100th day of a hunger strike at Guantanamo Bay to protest the military prison where the United States has been holding suspects captured in the so-called war on terrorism.

60 injured as US commuter trains collide

AFP, New York

A rush-hour collision between two commuter trains in a suburb north of New York City Friday injured 60 passengers, five of them seriously.

A spokesman for the Metro North commuter train line said the incident involved a train headed into the city and one traveling in the opposite direction toward New Haven, Connecticut.

"Sixty people have been taken to the hospital," Connecticut governor Dan Malloy said on Twitter.

"There are five people in critical condition, one in very critical condition."

The accident happened at the Connecticut city of Bridgeport at around 6:00pm.

Metro North, one of America's busiest commuter rail lines said it was not yet known what had caused the collision.

PHOTO: AFP

US chides Russia over missiles as Syria peace plans suffer

REUTERS, Beirut

The United States chided Russia for sending missiles to the Syrian government as plans for a peace conference promoted by Washington and Moscow were hit by diplomatic rifts over its scope and purpose.

The divisions among world powers that have prevented a coordinated resolution were also again on display, just 10 days after Russia and the United States agreed to bury differences and push for an urgent international conference to end the war.

The most senior US military officer, General Martin Dempsey, described Russia's recent delivery of anti-ship missiles to Assad as "ill-timed and very unfortunate" and risked prolonging a war which has already killed more than 80,000 Syrians and which the UN said had driven 1.5 million abroad.

While not responding directly to US assertions that it had sent Yakhont missiles, a spokesman for President Vladimir Putin said Russia would honour contracts to supply Syria, which has been a customer for Moscow's weaponry since the Cold War.

"It's at the very least an unfortunate decision that will embolden the regime and prolong the suffering," Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told reporters.

With a range of 300 km, the Yakhont could prove a threat to warships in the Mediterranean, should, for example, Western powers abandon their deep reserve and intervene to offer air support to the rebels, as they did in Libya two years ago.

No date has yet been agreed for the international meeting, which appears to face growing obstacles. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon met Putin in Russia on Friday and

said the conference should take place as soon as possible.

But highlighting the diplomatic conundrum it poses, France spelled out explicitly on Friday that it would oppose any meeting if Assad's regional ally Iran were invited - contrary to the Russian position that Tehran should be part of a solution.

The rebels and key Arab and Western backers will meet in Amman on Wednesday to discuss how to approach a conference. But it is also far from clear that Assad's opponents can forge a united front or agree to meet the president's representatives.

After months of diplomatic stalemate, Washington and Moscow have been pushed to convene the conference by the rising death toll and atrocities, signs of escalation across Syria's frontiers and suspicions that chemical arms may have been used.

Deadly floods sweep southern China; 53 killed

PTI, Beijing

At least 53 people were killed and several others reported missing in rain and hailstorms in south China, state media reported yesterday.

53 people were killed and several went missing in the rains, state-run television CCTV said.

Earlier, official Xinhua news agency reported that rainstorms have triggered flooding and landslides in some places.

Officials have been sent to undertake disaster relief operations in worst-hit Guangdong and Jiangxi Province.

The water levels of some rivers in Guangdong have surpassed warning lines, and an offshoot of the Beijiang River saw the worst flooding in a century, according to the headquarters.

A total of 6.50 lakh people in the province have been affected by the heavy rains and 2,675 houses have been destroyed, the report said.



Demonstrators applaud during the left-wing Italian metalworkers' union FIM rally in downtown Rome Piazza San Giovanni yesterday. Thousands of people protested in Rome yesterday against austerity policies and high unemployment, urging new Prime Minister Enrico Letta to focus on creating jobs to help pull the country out of recession.

PHOTO: AFP

Sharif calls for party meet

Army chief meets, congratulates Pak PM-elect

AGENCIES

PML-N chief Nawaz Sharif, set to become Pakistan's next prime minister, has convened a meeting of parliamentarians and legislators of his party here on May 20 to brainstorm a plan of action to deal with Pakistan's pressing problems including terrorism.

Besides at the centre, the PML-N is set to form government in Punjab and Balochistan provinces.

Sharif will preside over the meeting, which will decide on a plan of action to tackle the country's pressing problems, including terrorism and power cuts.

According to a PML-N official, the names of members of the federal cabinet too will be discussed and Sharif will take the lawmakers into confidence in this regard.



The PML-N bagged 124 of the 272 directly elected seats in the National Assembly or lower house of parliament.

Some 20 lawmakers, including independent candidates and members of smaller parties, have either joined the PML-N or said they will back party, giving it a simple majority in the National

Assembly.

Meanwhile, Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff General Ashfaq Pervez Kayani met Nawaz Sharif in Lahore, Dawn reported yesterday.

Kayani had lunch with the Sharif's after the meeting, which took place for around an hour.

The Army chief congratulated the Sharif brothers over their victory in the recent general elections. Matters of the state and future course of action were also discussed in the meeting

The ghost of Nixon and Obama's present crisis

THE TELEGRAPH ONLINE

Somewhere Richard Nixon is smiling. Four decades after Watergate and two decades after his death, we still can't stop talking about the dark anti-hero of American politics. His five-o'clock shadowy visage remains too convenient a metaphor for lazy critics looking to lacerate a president from the opposing party.

The latest non-Watergate to be labelled its second coming is actually a combination of three separate scandals afflicting the Barack Obama administration.

The collective weight of this scandalabra threatens to derail the president's ambitious legislative agenda, dragging him to premature lame duck status. But it doesn't represent outright criminality emanating from the Oval Office or promise to provoke a constitutional crisis, however fervently Obama's critics might wish it.

In fact the ritualistic invocation has the opposite to the desired effect, making the scandals look smaller than they are by comparison with Nixon's.

The IRS scandal is the most serious, and the most likely to bring back a genuine whiff of Tricky Dick. In this case, IRS workers were filtering a wave of applications for tax-exempt status by political organisations during the run-up to the 2012 election - casting an unacceptable and possibly illegal eye towards whether they had the phrases like "Tea Party" or "Patriot" in their name. While none of the conservative applicants

were ultimately denied tax-exempt status, the intrusive inquiries delayed their advocacy and cast a chill on the political process.

After the scandal broke last week, President Obama denounced the actions as "outrageous" and fired the acting IRS director along with a top deputy.

But it's a long way from Nixon ordering the IRS to audit individuals on his political enemies list.

The second scandal came when the Associated Press was told by the Justice Department that reporters' phone records had been secretly subpoenaed as part of an investigation into a leak concerning national security, most likely related to a story that compromised a field agent's identity.

The press was outraged and in a series of brutal press conferences condemned the move.

Here too Republicans invoked Nixon against Obama. But ironically it was Republicans who had first called for the leak investigation, during the presidential campaign.

Finally, there is the continuing inquiry into the killing of four Americans in Benghazi.

Facts are the best way to stop a feeding frenzy and the Obama administration finally seems to be taking these scandals seriously.

The inquiries will continue, but we already see how reflexive partisan projections distort and discredit the search for truth. That is only compounded by the impulse to impose old narratives about "Nixon" and "Watergate" on current events.

BJP ups ante against Indian PM

Threatens to stall House

PTI, Lucknow

BJP yesterday said parliament would not be allowed to function unless Prime Minister Manmohan Singh resigned on the issue of Coalgate scam.

"We are not against the Food Security bill... but (unless) the PM resigns, parliament will not be allowed to proceed," BJP national general secretary Ananth Kumar said.

"Till the time the PM resigns, an independent inquiry is not possible," he added.

Kumar's comments came while he was responding to a question on his party's stand on a likely special session of parliament to clear the proposed Food Security Bill.

Kumar is here in connection with BJP's proposed nationwide 'jail bharo' campaign against corruption and inflation, which is to run from May 27 till June 2.

He said that a meeting of the BJP national executive would be held in June to discuss the strategy for the party's anti-corruption drive.



Mandela family falls out over legacy

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

Nelson Mandela was "furious" that two of his daughters went behind his back to meddle in the management of his personal wealth, his lawyer has claimed in a case that exposes ugly battles over the lucrative Mandela brand.

Makaziwe and Zenani Mandela allegedly amended a trust deed in secret so they could gain access to the former president's wealth, according to court papers filed by Bally Chuene, the lawyer. The affidavit offers an insight into potential conflicts over the 94-year-old's inheritance.

"Why are people obsessed with the Mandela family?" Makaziwe demanded. "They are human beings like anyone else. They have ambitions to be successful in life like anyone else, and I don't see anything wrong with that."

Married three times, Nelson Mandela has fathered six children, three of whom are still alive. Blessed - or cursed - with Africa's most famous name, most of the Mandela's grand children have gone into business using the family name.

With the former president frail and his lucidity dwindling, some fear the case is indicative of a looming, unseemly struggle for his legacy.

Afghanistan fails to pass women's law

REUTERS, Kabul

Afghanistan's parliament failed to pass a law yesterday banning violence against women, a severe blow to progress made in women's rights in the conservative Muslim country since the Islamist Taliban was toppled over a decade ago.

President Hamid Karzai approved the law by decree in 2009 and parliament's endorsement was required. But a rift between conservative and more secular members of the assembly resulted in debate being deferred to a later date.

Religious members objected to at least eight articles in the legislation, including keeping the legal age for women to marry at 16, the existence of shelters for domestic abuse victims and the halving of the number of wives permitted to two.

Women have won back the hard-fought right to education and work since the Taliban wregime, but there are fears these freedoms could shrink once again after Nato-led forces leave Afghanistan.

ODDLY enough

Baby tweets for a diaper change!

CNN ONLINE

Huggies Brazil announced that it was testing TweetPee, an iPhone app with a clip-on humidity sensor intended to capture when a child's diaper is wet.

A spokesman for Kimberly-Clark Corp., which owns Huggies, confirmed that TweetPee was indeed real.

How does it work? An owl-shaped plastic humidity sensor activates the app, which then tweets parents that it's time to change the diaper. Considered a concept device, neither the owl-shaped sensor nor the app is available for purchase.

Fortune found in a cookie jar!

AFP, Chicago

A US man who dug a handful of old lottery tickets out of his cookie jar was shocked to find out one of them was worth \$4.85 million, officials said.

Ricardo Cerezo's wife asked him to take the 11 lotto tickets that had been sitting around the house to the store to check if any of them were winners.

"I can't believe I had \$4.85 million in a cookie jar for over three months!" Cerezo said after receiving a ceremonial check on Wednesday in Geneva, Illinois.