

ASIA TOUR

Kerry in Seoul for talks on North Korea

AFP, Seoul

US Secretary of State John Kerry held talks in Seoul yesterday on curbing North Korea's nuclear programme, as the two Koreas locked horns at rare, high-level talks over looming South Korea-US military drills.

South Korea was Kerry's first stop on an Asia tour that will also take him to China and Indonesia, with a focus on regional tensions stoked by China's territorial claims.

"North Korea -- obviously the challenge with their nuclear programme -- remains an essential security issue," Kerry said as he met President Park Geun-Hye shortly after arriving.

As well as discussing efforts to rein in Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions, Kerry will be briefed on a diplomatic initiative that saw the two Koreas sit down Wednesday for their highest-level official talks since 2007.

The discussions ran late into the night, and ended without any tangible agreement or joint statement.

But the two sides announced a second round would be held today in the border truce village of Panmunjom where the armistice ending the 1950-53 Korean War was signed 60 years ago.

Although the talks have no fixed agenda, the South is focused on ensuring that a planned reunion later this month for family members separated by the 1950-53 Korean War goes ahead as scheduled.

The February 20-25 event overlaps with the start of South Korea's annual joint military exercises with the United States, which Pyongyang has denounced as provocative.

In Beijing, Kerry will encourage China to "use its unique set of ties and leverage" to pressure Pyongyang to prove it is serious about wanting to restart the six-party process, a State Department official said.



SNOWMAGGEDON

takes aim at US

A woman walks next to the Reflecting Pool in front of the Lincoln Memorial as a heavy snow storm hits Washington DC, yesterday. The major storm blowing in heavy snow and ice gripped large swaths of the winter-weary United States early yesterday, leaving a dozen people dead and knocking out power to hundreds of thousands of homes. Thousands of travellers were stranded as flights, including at major air hubs in Atlanta and New York, were canceled, and nearly 800,000 homes and businesses lost power, mainly in Georgia and North and South Carolina.

PHOTO: AFP

Sisi negotiates arms deal in Russia to fill up US void

Gets Putin's support for Egypt's presidency

AFP, Moscow

Egyptian army chief and likely new president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi was negotiating a \$2-billion arms deal with Russia yesterday meant to replace subsidizing assistance from old ally Washington.

Sisi arrived in Moscow on Wednesday with Egyptian Foreign Minister Nabil Fahmy for a second round of so-called "2+2" talks with their Russian counterparts.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu had made a landmark trip to Cairo in November aimed at reviving ties that had remained stagnant since Soviet times.

Sisi later received support for his likely bid to be Egyptian head of state from President Vladimir Putin during a meeting at the Russian leader's suburban Moscow residence.

"I know that you, mister defence minister, have decided to run for president of Egypt," Putin told Sisi in televised remarks. "I wish you luck both from myself



personally and from the Russian people."

Sisi has not yet actually declared his presidential ambitions but is overwhelmingly expected to run in elections expected to be held later this year.

Moscow's authoritative Vedomosti business daily reported on November 15 that the deals under discussion were worth more than \$2 billion and could be financed by Saudi Arabia.

The Soviet Union was the main supplier of arms to Egypt in the 1960s and early 1970s. Cooperation between the two sides dropped after Israel and Egypt signed a peace treaty and Cairo began receiving generous US aid.

But Washington suspended some of its military assistance to Egypt after the July ousting of democratically-elected Islamist president Mohamed Morsi. Moscow has been keen to fill the resulting void and Shoigu made clear that Moscow fully supported the tough measures taken by Sisi against Morsi and his Muslim Brotherhood movement.

Storm-battered Britain faces mass power cuts

AFP, London

Hurricane-force winds from an Atlantic storm left tens of thousands of Britons without power yesterday and one man dead, adding to the misery after devastating floods caused by the wettest winter in 250 years.

Around 80,000 households remain without electricity, with Wales the worst affected by the "Wild Wednesday" storms, although the figure was reduced from some 150,000 overnight as electricity workers battled to reconnect people.

The latest problems pile pressure on Prime Minister David Cameron's government, which has faced criticism for being slow to help people in flood-hit areas.

Britain also faces an economic battering after Bank of England governor Mark Carney said the fragile recovery from recession would be affected as the bad weather hits farming and transport.

Gusts approaching 160 kilometres per hour tore at parts of England and Wales overnight, and the River Thames was predicted to rise to its highest level in more than 60 years in places, threatening towns and villages to the west of London.

One man died after being electrocuted while attempting to move a fallen tree that had brought down power lines in Wiltshire, southwest England, the first to be killed in the latest round of storms.

The Met Office national weather service issued a red warning -- the highest threat level -- for "exceptionally strong winds" in western parts of Wales and northwest England.

NEWSIN

brief

China's lunar rover comes 'back to life'

AFP, Beijing

China's troubled Jade Rabbit lunar rover has survived a bitterly cold 14-day lunar night, officials said yesterday, prompting hopes it can be repaired after suffering a malfunction last month. The problem was a setback for Beijing's ambitious military-run space programme, which includes plans for a permanent orbiting station by 2020 and eventually sending a human to the moon.

Sudan-rebel peace talks begin

AFP, Khartoum

The UN yesterday urged the Sudanese government and rebels, meeting for their first peace talks in almost a year, to declare an immediate ceasefire so aid can reach more than one million civilians. Negotiations between Khartoum and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N) were to open in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, later yesterday under African Union mediation.

Car blast kills 6 at Mogadishu airport

AFP, Mogadishu

At least six people were killed and many more wounded yesterday in a car bomb attack close to the entrance of Mogadishu's heavily-fortified international airport, police and witnesses said. There was no immediate claim of responsibility, but the attack bore all the hallmarks of Shebab, who are fighting to overthrow Somalia's internationally-backed government.

Boston blasts trial set for November

AFP, Boston

A US judge has set a November trial date for Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, the chief suspect accused of bombing last year's Boston marathon, killing three people and wounding 260 others. The trial, which is likely to attract global media interest, will begin on November 3 and could last several months, US District Judge George O'Toole ruled Wednesday.

Afghan insider attack kills 2 US troops

AFP, Kabul

Two Afghan men wearing military uniforms have shot dead two US soldiers, in the first suspected "insider attack" of the year as Nato troops withdraw after 13 years of fighting Taliban militants. Incidents in which Afghan forces turn their guns on their allies have killed scores of US-led troops.

PROTESTS GRIP VENEZUELA

Students clash with National Guards members during an opposition demonstration against the government of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, in Caracas, on Wednesday. Inset, People run in front of burnt CICPC (Scientific Police) cars during the clashes. The protests left at least three people dead and dozens injured, prompting President Nicolas Maduro to declare he would not fall as he ordered a clamp-down in cities across the country.

PHOTO: AFP



Lose the pound if you leave UK

British FM tells Scottish people

AFP, Edinburgh

British finance minister George Osborne said yesterday there was no legal reason the rest of the United Kingdom should share the pound with an independent Scotland if it votes to break away in a referendum this year.

"There's no legal reason why the rest of the UK would need to share its currency with Scotland," Osborne said in a speech.

"If Scotland walks away from the UK, it walks away from the UK pound."

First Minister Alex Salmond's Scottish National Party has claimed an independent Scotland would have the right to retain the pound and become part of a currency union with the rest of Britain.

But in the British government's strongest intervention in the independence debate to date, Osborne said the SNP had offered "nothing more than confusion, wild assertion and empty threats".

He said: "They are like the angry party to a messy divorce. But the pound isn't an asset to be divided up between two countries after a break-up as if it were a CD collection."

Prime Minister David Cameron took a softer tone in a speech last week, urging all parts of the United Kingdom to persuade their Scottish friends and family to vote against independence in the September 18 referendum.

Russia, US take centre stage

Fighting escalates on the ground; '236 people being killed daily'

AFP, Geneva

The UN's mediator on the Syria conflict was to meet high-level Russian and US diplomats in Geneva yesterday in hope of breathing new life into the flagging peace talks as death toll keeps mounting in the nearly three-year civil war.

Lakhdar Brahimi was to meet Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov and US Under Secretary of State Wendy Sherman in an attempt to unblock the process.

After three days spent trading blame for the violence wracking Syria, representatives of President Bashar al-Assad's regime and the opposition National Coalition had no scheduled meetings in Geneva yesterday.

"The presence now of the United States and Russia comes at the right time," opposition chief negotiator Hadi Bahra told AFP, saying there was a need to "straighten out the negatives."

The talks that began on January 22 were initiated by Washington, which backs the opposition, and Moscow, a key ally of Syria.

With the process at an apparent standstill Russia seemed prepared to

play a greater role, and was expected to put more pressure on the regime to move things forward.

Russia -- which has rejected a Security Council resolution that would allow the delivery of food and aid to besieged Homs and other cities -- on Wednesday proposed a counteroffer that not include the threat of sanctions on Damascus.

Gatilov met Wednesday in Geneva with the regime delegation chief,

SYRIA

PEACE TALKS

Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem, and the opposition said it might meet the Russian diplomat yesterday.

Russia has also proposed a collective meeting with the UN, Washington, Moscow and the Syrian foes, but it remained unclear if the warring parties might be invited to Thursday's meeting between Brahimi, Gatilov and Sherman.

The so-called Geneva II negotia-

tions have so far done nothing to end the nearly three-year civil war which has claimed more than 136,000 lives and forced millions from their homes.

And as Brahimi struggles to prevent peace talks in Geneva from collapsing, a spike in regime air attacks and fighting has sent the death toll in Syria's war soaring.

On Thursday, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported at least 51 people killed a day earlier in Aleppo alone, mostly civilians in air raids targeting opposition-controlled areas, as dozens more were killed in the south.

In ravaged Homs, where a humanitarian operation began last Friday, governor Talal al-Barazi said the authorities would focus on screening and clearing scores of men detained after being evacuated from besieged rebel-held areas.

The Observatory has reported an average of 236 people killed daily since the Geneva II process began on January 22, bringing regime and opposition representatives to the negotiating table but producing no concrete result.

Thailand deports 1,300 Rohingyas

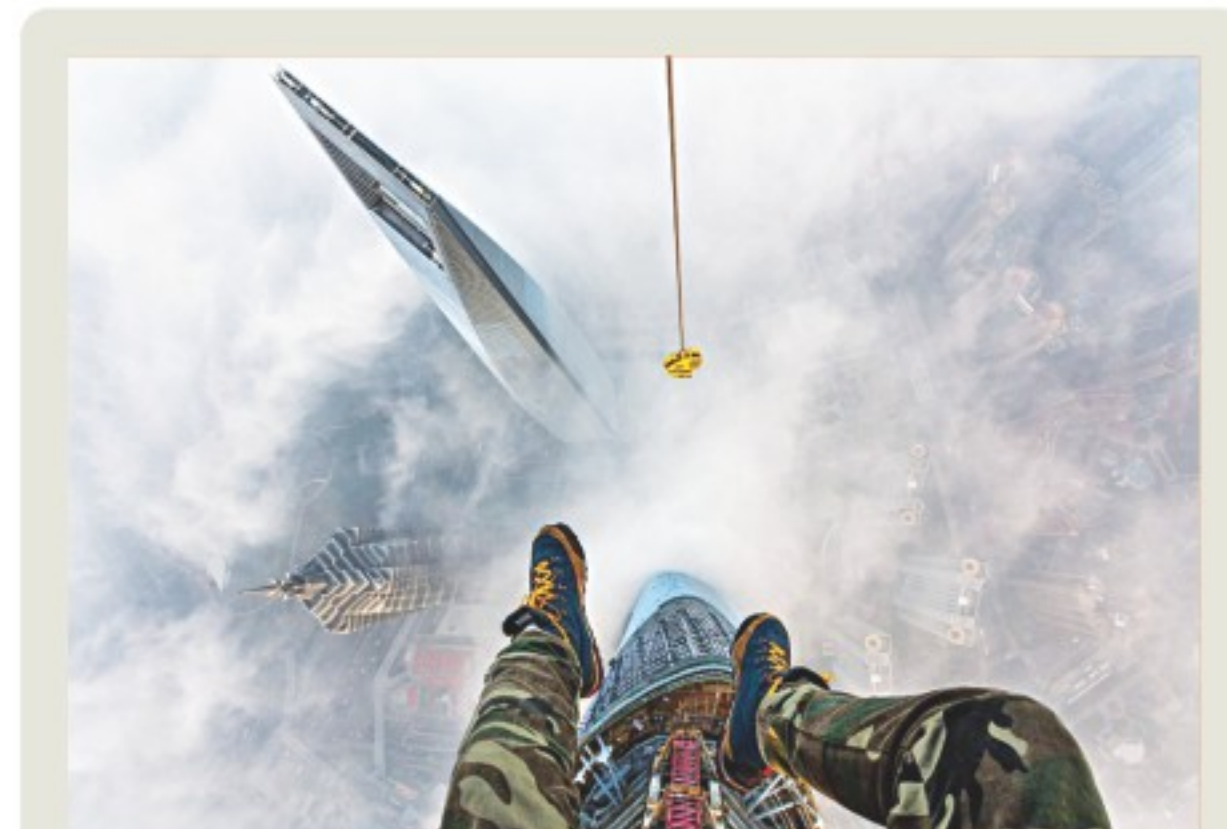
AFP, Bangkok

Thailand has sent around 1,300 Rohingya refugees back to Myanmar, a top official said yesterday, dismayed rights campaigners who warned the minority Muslims face persecution in the former junta-ruled country.

Thousands of Rohingyas, described by the United Nations as among the world's most persecuted minorities, have fled sectarian violence in western Myanmar in rickety boats since 2012, mostly heading for Malaysia.

About 2,000 who arrived in Thai waters were locked up in overcrowded immigration prisons or held in shelters for women and children.

It was the first official news of the deportation. It is unclear what happened to them after they left.



Don't look down!

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Two Russian climbers filmed themselves defying gravity (and death) by climbing the world's second tallest building without any ropes or climbing gear.

Vadim Makhorov and Vitaliy Raskalov used head cameras to film themselves breaking into and climbing the still unfinished Shanghai Tower in China as they scaled the 632m structure without any safety gear.

Their cameras show vertigo-inducing panoramas of Shanghai hundreds of metres below as they continue their ascent. The pair even passed clouds during their climb.

The Tower will be one of the tallest buildings in the world upon its completion, second only to the 830 metre Burj Khalifa in the UAE, the tallest man-made structure in the world.