

N Korea proposes suspension of military hostilities

AFP, Seoul

North Korea yesterday proposed that the two Koreas halt hostile military activities from later this week -- an apparent show of its desire for peace before a visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping.

The surprise suggestion from the North's top military body, the National Defence Commission (NDC), was made hours after Pyongyang confirmed its second missile test in recent days.

"Let's show all Koreans and the world a resolute decision to completely stop all military hostile acts of pushing the North-South relations to the brink of a war," the commission said in a statement reported by the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA).

The North is ready to suspend all acts of verbal provocation and slander from Friday, and urged the South to reciprocate, it said.

Earlier this year Seoul dismissed a similar North Korean overture as a "deceptive" propaganda exercise.

The NDC statement also called for an end to live-fire drills and other hostile military activities near the Koreas' disputed border in the Yellow Sea -- a frequent flashpoint -- from Friday.

There have been no direct military clashes at the maritime border since 2010, but the two sides intermittently fire warning shots there and engage in live-fire drills.

The North also urged the South to scrap its annual joint military exercises with the United States slated for August, to create a favourable mood for this year's Asian Games in the

South Korean city of Incheon.

Pyongyang has promised to send athletes to the games, to be held from September 19 to October 4.

Xi is visiting Seoul on Thursday and Friday for talks with President Park Geun-Hye before going on to Pyongyang.

China is North Korea's sole major ally and key economic benefactor, and the fact that Xi is visiting Seoul first has been seen by some as a deliberate snub.

Despite its leverage, an increasingly frustrated China has failed to persuade the North to curb its nuclear weapons programme and to stop raising regional tensions through missile and atomic tests.

The NDC's statement urged Seoul not to take issue with the North's nuclear weapons, calling them a "valuable" asset.

"We courteously advise them not to resort any longer to such harmful acts as taking issue with the DPRK's nuclear deterrence," it said.

With Xi and Park expected to discuss Pyongyang's nuclear weapons, the North's ruling party newspaper, the Rodong Sinmun, lashed out at efforts to curb its nuclear ambitions as a "stupid fantasy".

Pyongyang announced separately yesterday that it will put two detained American tourists on trial on charges including "perpetrating hostile acts". KCNA said suspicions about such acts had been confirmed by evidence and their testimony.

Matthew Todd Miller, 24, was arrested in April after he apparently ripped up his visa at immigration and demanded asylum in the communist state.

Jeffrey Edward Fowle, who entered the North on April 29, was arrested after the 56-year-old reportedly left a Bible at a hotel.

The North's latest olive branch followed a series of missile launches, including Sunday's test-launch of two short-range Scud missiles overseen by its leader Kim Jong-Un.

A KCNA report was unclear about the type of missile, but the South's military said Sunday's test was of two Scud missiles with a range of about 500 kilometres (300 miles).

A few days earlier, a similar North Korean report had hailed the test of a "cutting-edge" guided missile as a "breakthrough" in its military capability.

The North carries out regular missile tests, sometimes for technical reasons but often to register its displeasure with events elsewhere.

According to KCNA, Kim argued that the missile tests "had not the slightest impact" on regional peace and security, and were in fact a guarantee of regional stability.

"Durable peace can be protected only when one is so strong that nobody dares provoke one and it can be guaranteed by one's own strength," he said.

Tensions between North and South Korea have been running high for months.

Most recently, the North's army threatened a "devastating strike" after the South held a live-fire drill near the maritime border.

In March the two sides fired hundreds of shells across the border into each other's waters after the North dropped shells on the South's side.

Modi pitches

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carrying five satellites at Sriharikota launch centre in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh.

India's space programme is driven by a vision of service to humanity, not a desire for power, Modi said, adding that India must share the fruits of its advancement in space technology with the developing world and neighbours in particular.

He called upon the scientists to take up the challenge of developing a satellite "that can be dedicated to our neighbourhood as a gift from India".

Saarc comprises Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Pakistan, Maldives, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and India.

The Indian polar satellite vehicle launched yesterday is carrying five satellites from France, Singapore, Germany and Canada.

"Today's satellites are from developed nations. This is a global endorsement of our space programme," Modi said, as the launch of the rocket bolsters India's goal of capturing more of the \$304 billion annual global space market.

"This fills every Indian's heart with pride and I can see it reflected in the joy and satisfaction on your faces," he said, adding that India's current Mars mission cost less than the budget of the Hollywood science fiction film "Gravity".

He was following the progress of the Mars mission keenly. India's Mars rocket or Mangalyaan is expected to reach the red planet on September 24.

Earlier, India used to buy satellite images from countries like the US and France. The rocket launch reinforces India's success in launching satellites for the West that is also buying remote sensing images from India.

Modi said India can be proud of its space programme which is fully indigenous and has been developed in the face of international pressure and hurdles.

56 Bangladeshis

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with promise of a monthly salary Tk 32,000, Arshad said.

But the company is now paying each of them only Tk 8,000 to 10,000 per month, he said.

"We have several times requested our company management to increase our salaries. Every time they assured us of doing that, but they have yet done nothing to this end," Arshad added.

Finally, the workers submitted a written letter to the management on June 21 and gave an ultimatum to quit their jobs. The management again took 10 days to consider their demand.

The Bangladeshis agreed with their proposal. But on June 25, some security persons of the company came to their labour camp and warned the workers of stern action if they further tried to protest.

At one stage of the altercation, the security persons beat up some of the workers, Arshad alleged.

The Bangladeshis then approached their recruiting agencies to take necessary measures in this regard. But the agencies refused to listen to the workers. They rather misbehaved with the workers.

When contacted, Bashir Sarwar, a Bangladeshi who lives in Sudan and works as broker for the two agencies, threatened them with punishment, Arshad alleged.

It was not possible to contact Al-Purbasha Enterprise despite repeated attempts to reach the recruiting agency over the phone.

However, Akter Hossain, the proprietor of Gulam Rabbi International, said he did not send anybody to Sudan. He was present when eight of the 56 paid Al-Purbasha their money.

Begum Shamsun Nahar, director general of the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training, said the workers did not take manpower clearances before going to Sudan.

Rare Roman coin found in Russia: archeologists

AFP, Moscow

A rare Roman coin dating back to the fourth century AD has been unearthed in northwestern Russia, archeologists said yesterday.

The copper coin was found on Friday evening at an excavation site in the Russian city of Veliky Novgorod located some 550 kilometres (340 miles) northwest of Moscow.

"The coin bears the image of a she-wolf with Romulus and Remus - the founders of Rome -- on one side and the image of a Roman goddess on the other side," Oleg Oleynikov, head of the excavation expedition, told AFP.

The find is dated to the time of the founder of Constantinople, Constantine I, at the beginning of the fourth century AD, said Oleynikov.

The coin is "the most ancient" of some 4,000 artifacts that have so far been discovered in the city by a search organised by the Archeology Institute of the Russian Academy of Science.

"This discovery is a new page in the history of ties between Constantinople and Russia of those times," said Oleynikov.

British PM ready to 'do business' with Juncker

AFP, London

Britain's David Cameron faces parliament yesterday over his failure to stop Jean-Claude Juncker becoming the next president of the European Commission, insisting he could "do business" with him to win concessions from the EU.

The prime minister was set to face criticism from the opposition Labour party in the House of Commons from 1530 (1430 GMT) although eurosceptics in his centre-right Conservative party broadly support his stance.

Cameron telephoned Juncker on Sunday night to congratulate him, and wrote in the Daily Telegraph newspaper that he hoped to work with the former Luxembourg premier to gain a "fair deal" for Britain in Europe.

Cameron has promised to renegotiate Britain's relationship with Brussels before an in-out referendum due in 2017, but critics say his vocal opposition to Juncker and failure to prevent his nomination have hurt his chances of doing so.

"If by a fair deal we can agree that we are not heading, at different speeds, to the same place -- as some have assumed up to now -- then there is business we can do," Cameron wrote.

"I do not oppose further integration within the eurozone: I think it is inevitable. Eurozone members must make those decisions.

"But I know the British people want no part of it."

Cameron forced an unprecedented vote on Juncker's nomination at a European summit in Brussels on Friday but he lost 26-2, with only Hungary's right-wing prime minister Viktor Orban supporting him.

The British premier has said the result could increase the prospects of Britain leaving the 28-member European Union after the referendum on the issue.

But German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble told the Financial Times that it would be "unimaginable" for Britain to leave, indicating that other EU nations may be willing to offer concessions.

"Historically, politically, democratically, culturally, Great Britain is entirely indispensable for Europe," the minister, who is a one of Chancellor Angela Merkel's closest confidants, said in an interview with the paper published yesterday.

Cameron has vowed to push for changes in Europe, such as bringing some powers back to Britain, ahead of a referendum to be held if his Conservative party wins a general election next year.

In his call with Juncker on Sunday, Cameron's office said the incoming commission chief had made a "commitment of finding a fair deal for Britain and Mr Juncker said that he was fully committed to finding solutions for the political concerns of the UK."

His piece in the Telegraph echoed that line, and denied that the vote had dealt a "fatal blow" to his strategy of renegotiating Britain's position in Europe over the next three years.

"I do not deny that it has made the task harder and the stakes higher," he added. "But it is not in our nature as a country to give up. That is not what we do."

Britain is now pushing for a prime position among the range of senior EU jobs that will be discussed at a further European Council meeting on 16 July.

Cameron's spokesman indicated yesterday that Britain would likely try for the trade commissioner's job, to push its emphasis on the single market within the EU, as opposed to political union.

"It's no secret the importance the UK attaches to an open, competitive and flexible EU economy," the spokesman said when asked about what posts Britain would push for.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi: The jihadist 'caliph'

AFP, Baghdad

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the shadowy jihadist fighting in Iraq and Syria, and newly declared leader of a "caliphate" encompassing all Muslims, is increasingly seen as more powerful than Al-Qaeda's chief.

The leader of the powerful Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) militant group was declared Sunday the "caliph" in an attempt to revive a system of rule that ended nearly 100 years ago with the fall of the Ottoman Empire.

"The Shura (council) of the Islamic State met and discussed this issue (of the caliphate)... The Islamic State decided to establish an Islamic caliphate and to designate a caliph for the state of the Muslims," ISIL spokesman Abu Mohammad al-Adnani said in an audio recording distributed online.

"The jihadist cleric Baghdadi was designated the caliph of the Muslims," said Adnani.

Baghdadi, born in Samarra in 1971 according to Washington, apparently joined the insurgency that erupted shortly after the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, at one point spending time in an American military prison in the country.

In October 2005, American forces said they believed they had killed "Abu Dua," one of Baghdadi's known aliases, in a strike on the Iraq-Syria border.

But that appears to have been incorrect, as he took the reins of what was then known as the Islamic State of Iraq

(ISI) in May 2010 after two of its chiefs were killed in a US-Iraqi raid.

Since then, details about him have slowly trickled out.

In October 2011, the US Treasury designated him as a "terrorist", and this year, Iraq released a picture they said was of Baghdadi, the first from an official source, depicting a balding, bearded man in a suit and tie.

US officials said last year that the jihadist was likely in Syria, but information of his whereabouts since has been unclear.

Late last month, Lieutenant General Abdulamir al-Zaidi, who heads a northern security command centre, said his forces believed Baghdadi was inside Iraq, but other officials have contested this.

He is touted within ISIL as a battlefield commander and tactician, a crucial distinction compared with Al-Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri, who has attracted legions of foreign fighters, with estimates pegging them in the thousands.

At the time Baghdadi took over the group in April 2010, when it was ISI and tied to Al-Qaeda, it appeared to be on the ropes, after the "surge" of US forces combined with the shifting allegiances of Sunni tribesmen to deal him a blow.

But the group has bounced back, expanding into Syria in 2013.

Baghdadi sought to merge with Al-Qaeda's Syrian franchise, Al-Nusra Front, which rejected the deal, and the two groups have mostly operated separately since.

Ex-Cameron aide Coulson faces retrial after phone-hacking case

AFP, London

Andy Coulson, a former top aide to British Prime Minister David Cameron, will face a retrial on some of the charges in his phone-hacking trial, prosecutors said yesterday.

Coulson, a former editor of the Rupert Murdoch-owned News of the World tabloid, will be tried again on charges of conspiring to commit misconduct in a public office by paying a police officer for royal telephone directories.

Jurors at London's Old Bailey court last week convicted him of one charge of illegally accessing voicemails but failed to reach a verdict on the other charges.

Coulson, 46, has yet to be sentenced but the maximum penalty for phone hacking is two years in prison.

His co-defendant Rebekah Brooks, another former News of the World editor who went on to head the British arm of Murdoch's operation, was cleared of all charges.

Coulson appeared in court yesterday in a preparatory hearing ahead of sentencing Friday with five others who were also convicted or pleaded guilty in the case.

The list of victims of News of the

World phone hacking "read like a Who's Who of Britain," prosecutor Andrew Edis told the court.

The newspaper "became at the highest level a criminal enterprise," he added.

Those affected included the then Kate Middleton, who is now married to Prince William, James Bond star Daniel Craig and actor Jude Law.

Months after resigning from the News of the World, Coulson became Cameron's director of communications between 2007 and 2011, when he again stepped down with scandal swirling.

The paper was closed in disgrace later that year.

Cameron last week apologised for hiring Coulson, who became a trusted confidant and part of his inner circle, saying it had been "the wrong decision."

The phone-hacking trial was one of the most expensive in English legal history, spotlighting the close ties between the Murdoch empire and politicians and the no-holds-barred methods of Britain's tabloid press.

Prosecutors say they will try to recover legal costs of £750,000 (940,000 euros, \$1.3 million) from the defendants.

Chemical worries won't be over

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last year after several meetings with the relevant ministries, scientists, experts and other stakeholders.

Cabinet Secretary Mosharraf Hossain Bhuiyan told journalists that the ongoing drive against the misuse of formalin would continue under the existing law until the new law comes into effect.

For immediate implementation, the authorities could use mobile court drives. Besides, formalin control committees could be formed in every district and upazila to supervise the act's enforcement, the secretary said.

Formalin is a solution of the gas formaldehyde, highly toxic to all animals. Ingestion of 30 millilitres of formalin has been reported to cause the death of adult humans. It is also very corrosive and its ingestion can cause severe injuries to the upper gastrointestinal tract, physicians said.

In 2011, the Department of Fisheries imported a digital kit Formaldehyde Meter Z-300, while the Bangladesh Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (BCSIR) developed another method to detect formalin in fish.

In 2012, the Federation of Bangladesh

Chambers of Commerce and Industries (FBCCI) imported and introduced the formalin detection kit in 11 city markets and declared the markets formalin-free.

Early in June, the Dhaka Metropolitan Police also started an anti-formalin drive in and around the capital to check formalin in seasonal fruits and destroyed tonnes of fruits, mainly mangoes and litchis.

However, Bangladesh Agricultural Research Council (BARC) observed that the imported kit was not fit for detecting formalin in food items. It was meant for detecting formaldehyde in air.

The cabinet approved the draft act amid panic among people over how safe the food they were eating was.

Rashid-E-Mahbub, chairman of the National Committee on Health Rights Movement, said the issue of food safety is a much bigger issue and controlling formalin use could only be a part.

He told The Daily Star that enforcement of the Food Safety Act through an independent and efficient authority could only improve food safety status. Dozens of chemicals were being used in the production and distribution of

crops, vegetables, fruits, chickens and animals, he said.

Feed for the poultry, fodder for cows, goats have often been found with harmful substances, which eventually enter the food chain and human body. Even processed, frozen and imported food items contain various types of colours and preservatives, recent lab tests show, he said.

Prof Nilufar Nahar of Dhaka University chemistry department said the Food Safety Act had set acceptable levels of some chemicals or pesticides in food production and preservation process but formalin was such a toxic substance that there was no question of setting any acceptable level.

The way formalin had been used in various food items, it was crucial to have a separate act like the one on acid control, she told The Daily Star.

The cabinet secretary said the proposed act was likely to be placed before parliament this session for passage.

Yesterday, the cabinet also gave the final nod to "Bangladesh Oceanographic Research Institute Act-2014" to facilitate extraction of marine resources.

France scrape through

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African champions Nigeria, meanwhile, must wait to sample the last eight at a World Cup, following defeat in their first knockout-phase match at the tournament since the 1998 competition in France.

Stephen Keshi's side nonetheless departed to the sound of warm applause from the fans crammed into the cavernous Mane Garrincha National Stadium, who allied themselves with Nigeria's cause from the off.

While France, who showed six changes, started purposefully, their final ball frequently let them down, which handed Nigeria opportunities to use their pace on the counter-attack.

Emmanuel Emenike thought he had put Nigeria ahead in the 19th minute when he deftly prodded in an in-swinging cross from Ahmed Musa, but the offside flag allowed French heart rates to return to normal.

France looked more threatening when they were able to bring the recalled Mathieu Valbuena into the game.

When the Marseille midfielder teed

up Pogba for a vicious volley mid-way through the first half, it took a stunning reflex save from Enyeama to keep the game scoreless.

Another intelligent pass from Valbuena then gave Mathieu Debuchy a sight of goal, but the Newcastle United right-back drilled wide.

Late in the first half Emenike took aim from range, but Hugo Lloris was able to parry.

Nigeria suffered a blow early in the second period when Lazio midfielder Ogenyi Onazi had to be stretchered off after an ugly, ankle-high challenge by Blaise Matuidi, who escaped with only a caution.

Faced with growing Nigeria pressure, Deschamps introduced Griezmann in place of Olivier Giroud with half an hour to play and the move quickly paid immediate dividends.

After Lloris had saved from Peter Odemwingie, a one-two between Karim Benzema and Griezmann set the Real Madrid man clear, but although he squeezed the ball past Enyeama, Victor Moses was on hand to hook clear.

It was to prove a temporary reprieve.

Yohan Cabaye, back from suspension, saw a 20-yard half-volley crash back off the bar before Enyeama had to produce a finger-tip save to touch a Benzema header over the bar.

It was the second fine stop of the match from the 31-year-old, but seconds later his failure to claim Valbuena's left-wing corner allowed Juventus midfielder Pogba to head in at the back post.

Enyeama then palmed a shot from Griezmann over the bar, but France made it 2-0 at the death when Yobo, under pressure from Griezmann, inadvertently steered Valbuena's drilled cross into his own net.

"I am very proud of what we have achieved," said France coach Didier Deschamps. "We were athletic, there were a lot of duels but we didn't let up."

Pogba was ecstatic at being so pivotal to the result.

"To score a goal for your country in such an important game is one of the biggest moments of my life," he said.

China slams 'illegal' Hong Kong democracy poll

AFP, Hong Kong

China yesterday condemned an unofficial Hong Kong referendum on democratic reform in which almost 800,000 people voted, calling it "illegal and invalid" on the eve of huge pro-democracy protests in the city.

Beijing said the vote went against Hong Kong's constitution and accused its organisers -- local democracy activists -- of breaching the rule of law.

Organised by the activist group Occupy Central, the informal referen-

dum saw more than 790,000 people vote over 10 days on how Hong Kong's next leader should be chosen.

Beijing said the activists were determined to "pursue self-interests through breaching the rule of law, disturbing Hong Kong's social order and holding back the progress of universal suffrage".

The statement, issued by the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office of the State Council and carried by China's official Xinhua news agency, said Beijing fully respects Hong Kong people's wish for universal suffrage, but such a wish

"can only be realized through lawful, rational and down-to-earth discussions among various sides".

Beijing has promised to let Hong Kong residents elect their next leader in 2017, but has ruled out giving voters a say in selecting candidates.

This has fuelled fears among democracy advocates in the city -- a British colony until 1997 -- that only those sympathetic to Beijing will be allowed to stand. Hong Kong's current chief executive was selected by a 1,200-strong pro-Beijing committee.