

N KOREA NUKE TEST

5 THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT

WHAT DO WE KNOW?

Seismologists detected a powerful artificial earthquake at 0030 GMT yesterday, which they said was centred around Punggye-ri, North Korea's nuclear test site. South Korea said the quake was caused by a nuclear device, with a yield of 10 kilotons -- the most powerful of Pyongyang's five nuclear tests to date.

WHY ANOTHER TEST?

The North Korean leadership says a credible nuclear deterrent is critical to the nation's survival, claiming it is under constant threat from an aggressive US. Experts say the tests are likely aimed at refining designs.

Outside monitors will analyse the yield from yesterday's test to try and determine whether it signals any breakthrough.

WEAPONS PROGRAMME

The four previous confirmed tests resulted in artificial quakes of increasing size. Yesterday's quake followed that pattern, registering at 5.3 magnitude. Seoul said the 10-kiloton yield was the "most powerful to date". The bomb that destroyed Hiroshima had a yield of 15 kilotons. Pyongyang claims its January test was of a miniaturised hydrogen bomb, which has the potential to be far more powerful than other nuclear devices.

MINIATURISED WARHEAD

The claim of miniaturisation is a significant worry for the international community, especially in the light of an apparently stepped-up missile testing programme over recent months and years. If Pyongyang can make a nuclear device small enough to fit on a warhead, it might one day achieve its oft-stated aim of hitting US targets.

WORLD REACTION

The test drew swift condemnation from China, the US and its regional allies South Korea and Japan, as well as calls for yet more sanctions from the United Nations Security Council. Beijing has been North Korea's main diplomatic supporter and protector for decades, shielding its errant ally from harsh international action.

SOURCE: AFP



South Korean amphibious vehicles fire smoke shells during a re-enactment of the Incheon landing to mark the 66th anniversary of the start of Operation Chromite, the battle that turned the tide in the Korean War, in the western port city of Incheon, yesterday. Inset, North Koreans dance to celebrate the 68th founding anniversary of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in Pyongyang.

PHOTO: AFP



Air strike kills top jihadist

Kerry, Lavrov meet, grapple over peace deal in Geneva

AGENCIES

The commander of Syria's largest rebel coalition has been killed in an air strike near Aleppo, in what analysts say is the biggest blow to the alliance since its formation.

Meanwhile, the United States and Russia yesterday grappled over plans to halt the fighting in Syria, as resurgent Moscow-backed regime forces tightened the noose around the beleaguered city of Aleppo.

The strike on a meeting of leaders of the Army of Conquest came after a major defeat for the rebels, which saw them once again besieged inside Aleppo after a pro-government advance this week.

Former al-Qaeda affiliate Al-Nusra Front, renamed Fateh al-Sham Front when it broke ties in July, announced on Twitter "the martyrdom" of commander Abu Omar Saraqeb in an air strike.

The jihadist Fateh al-Sham is a leading member of the Army of Conquest alliance, which groups its fighters with those of Islamist factions like Ahrar al-Sham.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said unidentified aircraft hit the Army of Conquest meeting on Thursday night, killing Saraqeb and another rebel commander named as Abu Muslim al-Shami.

A rebel source told Reuters initial information suggested it was most likely an American fighter jet that struck the hideout. It would be the first time the US-led coalition had targeted the group since its rebrand.

Charles Lister, a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute think-tank, said Saraqeb had helped found the Army of Conquest last year and once served as the "emir" of Idlib province.

In Geneva, Secretary of State John Kerry was once more locked in talks with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov, but US officials warned that negotiations could not go on forever without a breakthrough.

Washington wants Moscow to help clinch a ceasefire, get humanitarian aid to civilians and -- eventually -- set the stage for political talks to end a five-year war that has killed more than 290,000.

Senior officials travelling with Kerry said he would not have flown out once again to new face-to-face talks with Lavrov unless he thought there was a chance of progress.

UN envoy on Syria Staffan de Mistura said a successful outcome from the talks could provide a major boost towards resolving the conflict.

"(It) would have a major impact on humanitarian access, and in turn would have a positive impact on the way the political process would be relaunched," de Mistura said in Geneva.

SYRIA WAR



Abu Omar

Sanctions, isolation not working

AFP, Beijing

North Korea's fifth nuclear test is yet more evidence of how ineffective sanctions are in deterring Pyongyang while China is unwilling or unable to intervene, analysts say, with some arguing a new approach might be necessary -- engagement.

Since Pyongyang's first nuclear test sent tremors worldwide, it has been hit by five sets of United Nations sanctions over its atomic and missile programmes.

The carrot has been tried as well as the stick, with offers of food aid if Pyongyang abandons its weapons.

It has pursued them regardless, even as its own people have regularly suffered crippling food shortages over the years, under both Kim Jong-Il and his son and successor Kim Jong-Un.

His rule -- the third reign of the Kim dynasty -- has seen former top officials executed, including his own uncle, and blood-curdling threats of war against the South and the US, interspersed with appeals for peace.

At the same time he has yet to visit Beijing to pay his respects to China's rulers, his country's key diplomatic protector and provider of trade and aid.

Even so, and despite yesterday's new test, Beijing is unlikely "to opt for significantly greater pressure on the DPRK", said Bonnie Glaser,

senior adviser for Asia at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington.

Each successive test has been met with greater outrage and hand-wringing from the international community, to no avail.

Washington has long pushed the Asian giant to up the pressure on its unruly neighbour, but it is not clear how rigorously Beijing has enforced sanctions and tensions between the world's top two economies have risen.



Without Beijing's help, analysts agree, sanctions are a lost cause.

Friday's test "shows that our approach to North Korea has failed, we haven't managed to deter their nuclear ambitions," said Jenny Town, managing editor of 38 North, a website focusing on North Korea analysis.

John Carlson of the Lowy Institute in Sydney took a similar stance. "The only way to change the DPRK's behaviour is to engage with it and see if

there are incentives that can persuade it to freeze its nuclear and missile programmes," he said.

But prospects for engagement look dim. US President Barack Obama has his hands full with conflict in Syria, and South Korean president Park Geun-hye has held a hard line against the North.

While China has been increasingly frustrated by the North's defiance, Beijing fears both a flood of refugees if its neighbour is plunged into turmoil, and the presence of US troops on its border in a unified Korea.

The North may have even informed China of its intention to stage yesterday's blast, said Adam Cathcart an expert on Sino-North Korean relations at the University of Leeds in the UK.

"North Korean diplomat Choe Son-hui went to Beijing on Tuesday, and slipped out sometime thereafter -- it is quite possible that the purpose of that visit was to privately inform Chinese comrades of the planned test," he said.

A recent agreement between Washington and Seoul to station a missile defence system known as THAAD in the South has infuriated Beijing, which says the hardware poses a significant threat to regional security.

"THAAD brought China and North Korea closer by driving a wedge between China and South Korea," said John Delury, a historian at Yonsei University in Seoul.



A young Syrian rescue worker carries a wounded boy away from the rubble of a building following reported air strikes on the rebel-held town of Douma, east of the capital Damascus, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Turkey, EU agree to ease tensions after coup

Ankara sacks 11,285 teachers in new purge

AGENCIES

Turkey and the European Union yesterday agreed to ease tensions that had darkened Ankara's prospects of joining the bloc in the wake of the failed July 15 coup.

EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini and Enlargement Commissioner Johannes Hahn -- making the highest-level EU visit to Turkey since the coup -- said that new chapters in Ankara's long-running accession process should be opened and that visa liberalisation was still on the table.

Several Turkish and EU officials had engaged in a war of words after the attempted putsch, with Brussels slamming the ensuing crackdown and Ankara unhappy with an apparent lack of solidarity from the bloc.

"The key element which we agreed to was that we talk more to each other and a little bit less about each other, showing full

respect," Mogherini said after talks with Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu and EU Minister Omer Celik.

Mogherini unequivocally condemned the coup aimed at ousting President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, saying: "There is no space whatsoever... for any attempt at a coup."

She said the sides had an "in-depth discussion" about ensuring the rule of law was protected following criticism of the crackdown in which tens of thousands of people have been arrested or dismissed over alleged links to the putsch.

Meanwhile, Turkey has suspended 11,285 teachers for alleged links to the illegal Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK).

Prime Minister Binali Yildirim said that an estimated 14,000 teachers have links to the PKK, considered a terrorist organisation by the Turkish government, the European Union and the United States.

NEWSIN brief

400 additional US troops arrive in Iraq

AFP, Washington

More than 400 additional US troops have deployed to Iraq in recent days, a defense official said Thursday, as local forces prepare for an assault on Mosul, the Islamic State group's last major Iraqi stronghold. Colonel John Dorrian, a spokesman for the US-led coalition, said the number of US troops in country had grown from about 4,000 to 4,460.

Four dead in Spain as train derails

AFP, O Porrino

A train carrying tourists to Portugal from northwestern Spain veered off the tracks and smashed into a pillar yesterday just as it was approaching a station, leaving its driver and three others dead. The train, which was going to Porto in Portugal from Spain's Vigo, appeared to have hit the wall of a bridge as it was going underneath and subsequently crashed on a good-visibility, straight line.

33 stranded tourists rescued in French Alps

REUTERS, Chamonix

Thirty-three tourists who were trapped overnight in cable cars high above the glaciers of Mont Blanc were brought to safety yesterday morning after technicians repaired tangled cables, the operator said. Emergency workers had scrambled at first light to rescue the stranded people, who included a child, after the ride jammed at 5:30 pm on Thursday.

Nasa in historic asteroid mission

Nasa sends craft to asteroid to try and stop humanity being wiped out

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Nasa has sent a spacecraft chasing after an unexplored asteroid, in the hope that it might one day keep us from being destroyed.

The Osiris-Rex robotic hunter has blasted off to the asteroid Bennu. When it gets there it will scoop up bits of ancient space rock -- which could eventually tell us not just about where we came from but whether there is life elsewhere as well.

But before it helps us find aliens, the craft might help us save ourselves. Bennu comes past Earth every six years -- and could come so close in 150 years that it hits us. The odds are tiny -- less than one-tenth of 1 per cent -- but that is still significant.

And while the rock itself wouldn't destroy Earth, though could cause huge destruction, there are asteroids flying around.

By sending the craft to Bennu, scientists will be able to learn more about the still somewhat mysterious paths of asteroids, and help them predict when one might collide with us. It might also help them learn more about what to do if one is.

Tenth of wilderness lost since 1990s: study

AFP, Miami

Areas of the world that are untouched by humans are disappearing, with some 10 percent of the planet's wilderness gone since the 1990s, researchers said Thursday.

The study in the journal Current Biology raises concern about these vital areas that form the foundation for ecosystems, particularly in the places that have lost the most, the Amazon and Central Africa.

"We can't restore or offset our wilderness. Once it is gone, it is gone," lead study author James Watson told AFP.

"It is exactly the same as a species extinction," said Watson, a researcher at the University of Queensland in Australia.

For the study, researchers defined "wilderness" as "biologically and ecologically intact landscapes free of any significant human disturbance."

They made a map of such areas at present, and compared it to a map made using the same methods in the early 1990s.

or about 11.6 million square miles. Most of that wilderness is in Australia, North America, North Asia and North Africa.

Comparing the old map to the new one showed that an estimated 1.3 million square miles -- almost 10 percent of the wilderness area -- has been lost in the past two decades.

The amount lost is equal to twice the land mass of Alaska, or about half the entire Amazon. The study did not delve into reasons why, but Watson said it comes down to increased development by the planet's growing human population.

The worst affected areas were in South America, which has experienced a 30 percent decline in wilderness, and Africa, which has experienced a 14 percent loss.

"The amount of wilderness loss in just two decades is staggering," said co-author Oscar Venter of the University of Northern British Columbia.

"We need to recognize that wilderness areas, which we've foolishly considered to be de facto protected due to their remoteness, is actually being dramatically lost around the world."



INTER-STATE WATER SHARING DISPUTE Strike over SC verdict paralyses Bangalore

AFP, Bangalore

A mass strike shut down India's technology capital Bangalore yesterday, with hundreds of companies forced to remain closed and public transport services cancelled as thousands took to the streets over water shortages.

Schools, shops and some government offices also remained closed and there were few private cars on the usually clogged roads in the sprawling capital of southern Karnataka state, which has seen days of street protests.

The strike was called to protest against a Supreme Court order that Karnataka release thousands of gallons of water from its reservoirs into rivers that supply the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu, which has been suffering from a severe shortage.

Around 5,000 protesters took to the streets of Bangalore, some burning tyres and effigies of Tamil Nadu's Chief Minister Jayalalitha Jayaram.

"We will give our blood but not Cauvery water to Tamil Nadu," said Bangalore protester Pravin Shetty, referring to the river that flows through both states.

"How can the state government release our water to grow crops in the neighbouring state when we don't have enough of it for drinking purposes this year?"

The shut-down also left hundreds of rail and air passengers stranded at the city's railway station and airport, with no buses or taxis to take them.

India suffers severe water shortages that cause frequent tensions between states.