



War of words escalates

Pyongyang warns of 'actual war', Washington calls it 'pariah'

REUTERS, Geneva
North Korea yesterday faced a chorus of condemnation for its latest ballistic missile tests but declared that ongoing joint US-South Korea military exercises were aimed at conducting a "pre-emptive nuclear attack" against Pyongyang.

Ju Yong Choi, a North Korean diplomat, told the UN-sponsored Conference on Disarmament in Geneva that the annual drills were "a major cause of escalation of tension that might turn into actual war" on the divided Korean peninsula.

"The ongoing joint military exercise is carried out with massive mobilisation of troops, unprecedented in size, and various types of US strategic forces including nuclear carriers, nuclear strategic bombers and Stealth fighters," Ju told the 61-member forum.

"It will certainly jeopardise peace and stability in the region and drive the situation in the Korean peninsula to the brink of nuclear war," he said.

During the stormy 90-minute session, envoys from more than a dozen countries, including North Korea's main ally China, as well as Britain, France, Russia and the United States, condemned North Korea's test-firing of four ballistic missiles on Monday.

NORTH KOREAN MISSILE TESTS 'TO HIT US BASES IN JAPAN'



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un supervises a ballistic rocket launching drill of Hwasong artillery units of the Strategic Force of the KPA on the spot in this undated photo released by North Korea's Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) in Pyongyang yesterday.

Robert Wood, US Disarmament Ambassador, condemned North Korea's tests as its latest violation of UN Security Council resolutions. Pyongyang's weapons programme represented a "clear threat to the national security of every country of the region", he said.

North Korea yesterday said its missile launches were training for a strike on US bases in Japan.

Three of the four missiles fired came down provocatively close to US ally Japan, in waters that are part of its exclusive economic zone, representing a challenge to US President Donald Trump.

In separate phone calls, Trump -- whose rhetoric on the campaign trail had raised doubts about the issue -- reaffirmed Washington's "ironclad commitment" to Japan

and South Korea. The US will demonstrate to Pyongyang that there were "very dire consequences" for its actions, the White House said in a statement.

The United Nations Security Council scheduled an emergency meeting for today after a request by Washington and Tokyo to discuss additional measures following the launch.

China angry as US deploys 'Thaad'

REUTERS, Beijing
China yesterday said it would "resolutely" defend its security interests as the US began deploying the Thaad missile-defence system in South Korea that Beijing fears will undermine its own military capabilities.

"We are firmly opposed to the deployment of Thaad in the Republic of Korea by the US and the ROK," foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang told reporters at a regular press briefing in Beijing.

"China will resolutely take necessary measures to defend our own security interests. All consequences entailed from this will be borne by the US and the ROK."

The US Pacific Command said Monday its military had begun deploying the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system to South Korea, which is aimed at defending the US ally from a North Korean attack.

The Thaad system is meant to intercept and destroy short and medium-range ballistic missiles during their final phase of flight.

Beijing has railed against the deployment of Thaad, while the South Korean conglomerate Lotte Group has come under pressure in China for providing land to host the system.



Big blow to asylum-seekers

Hungary to detain all as EU court says states can deny visas to refugees

AFP, Budapest
Hungary's parliament yesterday approved the automatic detention of all asylum-seekers in container camps at the borders, sparking "deep concern" at the UN's refugee agency.

The legislation, approved by a large majority of lawmakers, is in response to recent terror attacks in Europe carried out by migrants, according to hardline Prime Minister Viktor Orban.

Speaking at a swearing-in of the latest contingent of some 450 new border police in Budapest yesterday, Orban called immigration "the Trojan horse of terrorism".

"If the world sees that we can defend our borders... then no one will try to come to Hungary illegally," he added.

Under the new measures, all asylum-seekers entering Hungary as well as those currently in the country will be confined in the container camps while their applications are processed.

Anyone who passed through a "safe third country"

including Serbia will be rejected, and any appeals against rejections will be fast-tracked into a three-day procedure.

Migrants whose applications are rejected may have to cover the costs of their own detention.

Hungary previously systematically detained all asylum applicants but suspended the practice in 2013 under pressure from Brussels, the UN refugee agency and the European Court of Human Rights.

Meanwhile, the EU's top court yesterday ruled that states can deny short-term humanitarian visas to people trying to enter to claim asylum, in a case of a Syrian family trying to come to Belgium.

The decision by the Luxembourg-based European Court of Justice's decision was seen as a test case for EU countries facing a surge in refugees in the past two years, mainly from Syria's civil war.

In a surprise judgment, the court ruled against the family from the besieged city of Aleppo who had applied for the humanitarian visas at the Belgian embassy in the Lebanese capital Beirut last October.



N Korea, Malaysia in Tit-for-tat exit ban on nationals

AFP, Kuala Lumpur
North Korea and Malaysia yesterday banned each other's citizens from leaving their countries, with Kuala Lumpur saying its nationals were effectively being held "hostage" in a row over the assassination of Kim Jong-Nam.

The extraordinary tit-for-tat moves came as the reclusive North faced growing international condemnation for a volley of missiles it fired into the Sea of Japan, defying stringent global sanctions aimed at halting its weapons programme.

Yesterday's developments marked a dramatic heightening of tensions with Malaysia three weeks after the half-brother of North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un was murdered at Malaysia's main airport with the banned VX nerve agent.

The North decided to "temporarily ban the exit of Malaysian citizens in the DPRK",

the official news agency KCNA said, citing the foreign ministry and using the country's official name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

The prohibition would remain in place "until the safety of the diplomats and citizens of the DPRK in Malaysia is fully guaranteed through the fair settlement of the case that occurred in Malaysia".

The Malaysian foreign ministry said 11 of its citizens were currently in North Korea -- three embassy staff, six family members and two who work for the UN's World Food Programme (WFP).

The WFP said the pair, as UN staffers, "are international civil servants who do not represent any country".

Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak condemned the ban and said he was ordering a similar ban on the movement of "all North Korean citizens in Malaysia". Analysts said they could number around 1,000.

KIM JONG-NAM KILLING



Vets remove 915 coins from turtle

AFP, Bangkok
A sea turtle dubbed 'Piggy Bank' has had her fortunes restored after Thai vets removed 915 coins from her stomach -- a deposit built up after years of gulping down good luck pennies tossed into its pond.

The 25-year-old turtle, called 'Omsin' in Thai, underwent a gruelling seven-hour surgery on Monday to remove the five kilogramme hoard of coins.

She was sent to Bangkok vets with a cracked shell and an X-ray unexpectedly revealed the haul, which came in various currencies.

"There were 915 coins in her stomach, we removed them one by one," said Nantrika Chansue, a veterinarian in charge of Chulalongkorn hospital's aquatic research centre told AFP.

"Piggy Bank is okay now but she will have to remain at the centre for up to two weeks," the vet added, saying it was the first surgery of its kind.

The troubled reptile lived for two decades in a small public park in Chonburi Province. Visitors tossed coins into her pond seeking to 'make merit' or good luck, a practice vets have urged the public to stop.

"A turtle can live up to 80 years and the belief is that throwing coins into the turtle pond will make the coin thrower live longer," Rungroj Thanawongnuvej, Dean of the Faculty of Veterinary Science at Chulalongkorn said in a statement.



Demonstrators rally against the Trump administration's new ban against travellers from six Muslim-majority nations, outside of the White House in Washington, US, on Monday.

NEWSIN brief

Avalanche hits French Alps ski resort

AFP, Tignes
An avalanche hit a ski slope in the popular French Alps resort of Tignes yesterday but no one was hurt, the resort said. Police had told AFP earlier yesterday that the avalanche, which hit at about 10:00am, had engulfed "many" skiers.

Thousands flee Myanmar clashes

AFP, Yangon
Thousands have fled a Myanmar town bordering China after over 30 people were killed as the army fought back ethnic rebels, officials said yesterday. The violence is some of the most intense to rattle the Kokang region since fighting in 2015 left scores dead and forced tens of thousands to flee into China.

2,100 Iran fighters killed in Iraq, Syria

AFP, Tehran
More than 2,000 fighters sent from Iran have been killed in Iraq and Syria, the head of Iran's veterans' affairs office said yesterday. Iran is, with Russia, the main military backer of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, and also organises militias fighting the IS group in Iraq.

Netanyahu grilled again

AFP, Jerusalem
Israeli police grilled PM Benjamin Netanyahu at his official Jerusalem home for over four on Monday in a long-running investigation into corruption suspicions, media reports said. Media had said that investigators were expected to interrogate the premier over suspicions of unlawfully receiving gifts from wealthy supporters.

WAR ON IS IN WEST MOSUL

Forces gain more ground

Retake govt HQ, museum; Turkey, Russia, US military chiefs meet

AGENCIES
Iraqi forces yesterday said they had seized the main government offices in Mosul and its famed museum as they made steady progress in their battle to retake the city's west from jihadists.

News of the advances came on the third day of a renewed offensive against the Islamic State group in west Mosul -- the largest remaining urban stronghold in the "caliphate" declared by the jihadists in 2014.

Supported by the US-led coalition bombing IS in Iraq and Syria, Iraqi forces began their push against west Mosul on February 19. The advance slowed during several days of bad weather but was renewed on Sunday.

Recent advances have brought government troops and police closer to Mosul's densely populated Old City, where hundreds of thousands of civilians are believed to still be trapped

under IS rule. Iraq's Joint Operations Command said in a statement that federal police and the elite Rapid Response unit had been able to "liberate" the headquarters for the Nineveh provincial government.

They also seized control of the Al-Hurriyah bridgehead, it said, in a step towards potentially relinking west Mosul with the city's east, which government forces seized from the jihadists earlier in the offensive.

Officers said that security forces had also managed to recapture the Mosul museum, where the jihadists destroyed priceless artefacts, releasing a video of their rampage in February 2015.

The recent fighting in west Mosul has forced more than 50,000 people to flee their homes.



WikiLeaks releases huge trove of CIA spying docs

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK
WikiLeaks has published a huge trove of what appear to be CIA spying secrets.

The files are the most comprehensive release of US spying files ever made public, according to Julian Assange. In all, there are 8,761 documents that account for "the entire hacking capacity of the CIA", Assange claimed in a release, and the trove is just the first of a series of "Vault 7" leaks.

Already, the files include far more pages than the Snowden files that exposed the vast hacking power of the NSA and other agencies. In publishing the documents, WikiLeaks had ensured that the CIA had "lost control of its arsenal", he claimed. That included a range of software and exploits that if real could allow unparalleled control of computers around the world.

It includes software that could allow people to take control of the most popular consumer electronics products used today, claimed WikiLeaks.

"Year Zero" introduces the scope and direction of the CIA's global covert hacking program, its malware arsenal and dozens of "zero day" weaponized exploits against a wide range of US and European company products, including Apple's iPhone, Google's Android and Microsoft's Windows and even Samsung TVs, which are turned into covert microphones," the organisation said in a release.

The public files don't include the cyber weapons themselves, according to a statement. The organisation will refrain from distributing "armed" software "until a consensus emerges on the technical and political nature of the CIA's program and how such 'weapons' should be analyzed, disarmed and published", it said.

The files were made available by a source who intended for them to start a conversation about whether the CIA had gained too much power, according to the organisation.

The organisation had teased the release in advance with strange messages about the release being "Year Zero", and references to "Vault 7". It had planned to release the files later on but that plan was thrown off when its press conference came under cyber attack, Assange claimed.