

ESCALATING ROW WITH US

N Korea seeks Asean's help

Says region 'reaching the brink of war' for Washington's action

North Korea has appealed to Southeast Asian countries for support in its row with the United States to prevent what it warned could be a "nuclear holocaust", according to a letter obtained by AFP.

In the letter to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' secretary general, North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong-Ho warned the situation on the Korean Peninsula was "reaching the brink of war" because of Washington's actions.

He urged the Asean chief to inform the 10-nation organisation's foreign ministers "about the grave situation" on the peninsula "and give them a proper proposal", while criticising at length US-South Korean military exercises.

Tensions have soared in the region in recent weeks in the wake of a series of North Korean missile tests and tough rhetoric from Washington on the isolated nation's rogue weapons programme.

A copy of the North's letter, dated March 23, was obtained by AFP yesterday ahead of an Asean leaders' summit in Manila where they are expected to discuss the situation on the peninsula.

North Korea is known to have close ties with some Asean members, including Cambodia and Laos.

However Asean has in the past spoken out against North Korea's nuclear ambitions.

Ri's letter appeared to be a highly unusual move.

A Southeast Asian diplomat said that, as far as he could recall, it was the first time North Korea had written a letter seeking Asean's help on the issue.

Ri wrote in the letter that the annual US-South Korea military exercises justified Pyongyang's decision to develop its own nuclear weapons.

"It is a fact clear to everyone that when they deploy the means of nuclear strike that can drive the Korean Peninsula into a nuclear holocaust in just seconds... the nature of such exercises can in no way be defensive," the letter said.

Washington has deployed an aircraft carrier strike group to the Korean peninsula amid signs the North could be preparing for a sixth nuclear test.

Admiral Harry Harris, who heads the US Pacific Command, said in Washington this week the US Carl Vinson strike group was in the Philippine Sea just east of Okinawa, "in striking range and power projection range of North Korea if called upon to do that."



A man is held by police in Westminster after an arrest was made on Whitehall in central London, Britain, yesterday. Police swooped on a man armed with knives metres away from the Houses of Parliament in London, arresting him on suspicion of preparing "acts of terrorism".

Iraqi forces retake town near Mosul

AFP, Hatra

Iraqi forces yesterday retook the town of Hatra, southwest of Mosul, on the third day of an operation that saw them wrest back a nearby UNESCO-listed ancient city, a statement said.

Hashed al-Shaabi paramilitary forces said they had flushed the Islamic State group out of Hatra, which lies 120 kilometres from Mosul.

The Hashed forces, which are dominated by Iran-backed militia groups, had retaken the nearby archaeological site of Hatra on Wednesday.

The ancient city is one of the heritage jewels of Iraq and was damaged by IS after they took over large parts of the country three years ago.

Besides the huge heritage value of ancient Hatra, the nearby city is of particular strategic significance because it commands access to roads linking the provinces of Nineveh, Salaheddin and Anbar.

PHOTO: AFP

Avoid 'illusions' on Brexit

Merkel warns UK; poll says Britons regret decision to leave EU

AFP, Berlin

Germany's Angela Merkel yesterday told Britain it should have no "illusions" it would retain the rights of an EU member after Brexit, hardening the tone ahead of a summit of the remaining 27 nations.

"A third-party state will not have the same rights or even superior rights to a member state," the German chancellor told parliament two days before the meeting in Brussels.

"This may sound self-evident, but I have to say this clearly because some in Britain seem to have illusions on this point," she said. "That would be a waste of time."

The leaders of the other 27 EU nations have stressed a united stance as they plan to meet tomorrow to set down the bloc's "red lines" -- although the talks will not begin until June, after Britain's election.

British Prime Minister Theresa May's spokesman, in a brief reaction, said only that London was approaching the negotiations "in a constructive

spirit and with enormous goodwill".

The EU has toughened its strategy, making new demands over financial services, immigration and the bills Britain must settle before ending its 44-year-old membership of the bloc.

Britain will also be required to give EU citizens permanent residency after living there for five years, in a challenge for May's Conservative government, which has vowed to limit immigration.

The EU's latest draft negotiating guidelines, agreed on Monday, seek to ensure Britain does not get a better deal outside the bloc than inside.

May, after starting the Article 50 process of leaving the EU last month, is seeking to shore up her mandate for the Brexit talks in a snap election on June 8.

Polls suggest her Conservatives will return with an increased majority.

A new survey, by YouGov for The Times newspaper, meanwhile for the first time signalled more people now believe the Brexit vote was a mistake, by a 45-43 percent margin.

May hosted a working dinner on

Wednesday with key EU Brexit negotiators, including European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker.

EU ministers were meanwhile meeting in Luxembourg to prepare the ground work for tomorrow's meeting.

"It seems that at the moment we are completely united on everything," said Maltese Vice Premier Louis Grech, whose country holds the rotating presidency of the EU. "Naturally we have to protect the EU's interests."

May has committed to pulling Britain out of Europe's single market to end free movement of EU citizens into Britain.

Earlier this week, a German senior finance official rejected this demand, in an interview with AFP.

"What won't work is having access to the internal market without freedom of movement" for EU citizens, said Jens Spahn, state secretary at the finance ministry.

"Or access for UK financial institutions to the European financial market if at the same time there is rampant deregulation in London."

CRACKDOWN ON PROTESTERS

Venezuela snubs regional powers

AFP, Caracas

Venezuela says it is quitting the Organization of American States in anger at pressure from the bloc over the government's handling of a deadly political crisis.

The announcement late Wednesday raised international tension over Venezuela, where unrest has left 28 people dead this month.

Echoed by the United States and European Union, the OAS has led an international chorus of concern over the economic and political chaos in the major oil-exporting country.

Bristling at the pressure, Venezuelan Foreign Minister Delcy Rodriguez said late Wednesday the government would launch a two-year process to pull out of the Washington-based regional diplomatic grouping.

She branded the OAS an "interventionist coalition" led by Washington.

OAS Secretary General Luis Almagro has dubbed Venezuela's Maduro a "dictator" for stifling the opposition.

On Wednesday, the permanent council of the 35-nation OAS agreed to hold a meeting of their foreign ministers to discuss the crisis -- a decision Venezuela had forewarned would prompt it to exit.



Obama did everything to beat me

AFP, Lagos

Nigeria's Goodluck Jonathan has blamed Barack Obama for his 2015 presidential election defeat to Muhammadu Buhari, alleging the former US president headed a global conspiracy to get rid of him.

Jonathan made the allegations in a new book out on Friday called "Against The Run of Play", which documents how he became the first Nigerian incumbent head of state to lose an election.

He said Obama and his officials "made it very clear to me by their actions that they wanted a change of government in Nigeria and were ready to do anything to achieve that purpose".

"They even brought some naval ships into the Gulf of Guinea in the days preceding the election," he wrote in the book.

Jonathan won widespread praise for conceding to Buhari before the final results were announced, preventing deadly violence that blighted previous elections in Nigeria.

But he alleged Obama influenced Britain's former PM David Cameron and the current French president Francois Hollande to work against him.

"I got on well with... Cameron but at some point, I noticed that the Americans were putting pressure on him and he had to join them against me," he said.

"But I didn't realise how far President Obama was prepared to go to remove me until France caved in to the pressure from America."

Le Pen uses guerrilla tactics to unsettle frontrunner Macron

AFP, Paris

French far-right presidential candidate Marine Le Pen hopped on to a fishing boat at dawn yesterday as she pursued a guerrilla-style campaign that has upstaged frontrunner Emmanuel Macron.

It was still dark when Le Pen boarded the trawler at the small port of Grau-du-Roi on the south coast for a four-hour trip out to sea, seeking to portray herself as the protector of small businesses against the man she says embodies "unbridled globalisation".

Le Pen, 48, was back on the attack yesterday saying her rival, a former banker, supported "an ultra-liberal economy" and "total deregulation".

Macron hit back in a Twitter message that reminded voters of the National Front (FN) candidate's pledge to pull out of the eurozone and hold a referendum on France's membership of the European

Union.

The latest poll suggests Macron will defeat Le Pen by a margin of 21 points in the runoff on May 7, and figures from France's traditional left and right -- both absent from the second round -- have backed him too.

There was a reminder of the legal woes surrounding Le Pen's campaign when a source in the French investigation into alleged FN expenses fraud at the European

Parliament said the sum involved was now believed to be nearly five million euros (\$5.5 million), more than twice an initial estimate.

The parliament accuses the FN of using funds meant for parliamentary assistants to pay staff including a bodyguard to work in France between 2012 and 2017, which contravenes the assembly's rules.

In March, Le Pen invoked her immunity as an MEP in refusing to submit to questioning by French prosecutors until after the election.

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN FRANCE



Smoke rises from an emergency medical service point after an airstrike in Idlib province, Syria, yesterday.

Syria accuses Israel of strike near Damascus airport

10 dead after air strikes on rebel-held hospitals in Syria

AFP, Damascus

Syria accused Israel of triggering a huge explosion near Damascus airport on Thursday by firing several missiles at a military position.

Meanwhile, air strikes on two hospitals in rebel-held northwestern Syria yesterday left 10 people dead including two babies in incubators, a monitor said.

They were among 19 people killed as a result of strikes across rebel-held Idlib province on, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said. It said the airstrike is possibly carried out by Russian warplanes.

An AFP correspondent in the village of Deir Sharqi, where one of the hospitals was hit, saw extensive damage and wards buried in

rubble. It was the third time in less than a week that medical facilities in the province, controlled by rebels and jihadist groups, had been hit in air strikes.



Israel has carried out multiple air strikes in Syria since the country's civil war erupted in 2011, most of which it has said targeted arms convoys or warehouses

of its Lebanese arch-foe Hezbollah, which is a close ally of the Syrian regime.

In line with its usual practice, Israel's military declined to comment on the

latest blast. Israeli Intelligence Minister Yisrael Katz said it was consistent with his government's policy to prevent arms transfers to Hezbollah,

but stopped short of confirming his country was behind any attack.

Syria's state news agency SANA said several Israeli missiles hit near the airport causing material damage.

Earlier, Damascus ally Hezbollah said the blast was "probably" the result of an Israeli air strike.

The Lebanese militant group's Al-Manar television said the raid hit a warehouse and fuel tanks, without specifying whether they were its own or belonged to the Syrian army or another of its allies.

Israeli warplanes have hit the airport and other bases around the capital in the past, targeting what it said were weapons stockpiles destined for Hezbollah.

FIGHTING WITH IS 2 US troops killed in Afghanistan

AFP, Washington

Two US troops were killed and another wounded while fighting an Islamic State group affiliate in Afghanistan, the US military said yesterday.

US Forces-Afghanistan said the troops "came under attack during a raid against insurgents in Nangarhar province" late Wednesday. The troops were working with partnered Afghan soldiers in the raid against IS Khorasan, a local offshoot of the jihadist group based in Iraq and Syria.

America has about 8,400 troops in Afghanistan. IS has made inroads into Afghanistan in recent years, attracting disaffected members of the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban as well as Uzbek Islamists.

Syrian refugee replaces Jolie

Made UN Goodwill Ambassador

AFP, Geneva

The UN yesterday said it had enlisted Yusra Mardini, the teenage Olympic swimmer who braved a Mediterranean crossing in a leaky dinghy fleeing war-torn Syria, to help raise awareness about the plight of refugees.

The United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) said it had appointed Mardini as its newest Goodwill Ambassador, a role long famously held by US movie star Angelina Jolie.

Mardini "has become a powerful voice for the forcibly displaced across the world and a powerful example of their resilience and determination to rebuild lives and positively contribute to host communities," UNHCR said in a statement.

The 19-year-old's story is indeed inspiring. In 2015, like millions of others, she fled her home in Syria.

During a perilous journey to the Greek island of Lesbos on board a packed dinghy, the engine failed and the craft began taking on water.

Mardini and her sister jumped into the sea, grabbed a rope and spent the next three-and-a-half hours in the choppy water towing the boat to safety.

Mardini, who has settled in Germany with her family, went on to take part in the first ever Olympic refugee team at the Rio de Janeiro games last year.

