

Take H-bomb threat 'literally'

Warns N Korea; Trump says Russia hurting US efforts on nuke issue

AGENCIES

A senior North Korean official issued a stern warning to the world that it should take "literally" his country's threat to test a nuclear weapon above ground as US President Donald Trump said that Russia was hurting US efforts to rid North Korea of nuclear weapons while China had been helpful.

The official, Ri Yong Pil, told CNN in an exclusive conversation: "Russia is hurting the US efforts made by North Korea's foreign minister last month should not be dismissed."

North Korea "has always brought its words into action," Ri said, visibly angry.

Speaking on a visit to New York for the United Nations General Assembly last month, Ri Yong Ho, the foreign minister, raised the possibility that North Korea could test a powerful hydrogen bomb over the Pacific Ocean. The threat came hours after US President Donald Trump threatened to "totally destroy" North Korea in a tweet.

"The foreign minister is very well aware of the intentions of our supreme leader, so I think you should take his words literally," Ri told CNN in Pyongyang.

North Korea carried out the strongest of its six-ever nuclear tests in early September, claiming to have used a hydrogen bomb. The US responded to the test by imposing fresh sanctions on the rogue state.

It also implied that diplomatic channels between the US

DEVELOPMENTS

Trump, Kim greet China leader on reelection
Matti says US 'not rushing to war'

The Catalan leader's high-wire bid for independence from Spain faltered yesterday when he backed away from a plan to call new elections amid disagreement within his own party.

Carles Puigdemont, the president of Catalonia, said he had considered the option of dissolving the regional parliament and calling new elections in an effort to shore up his position in the standoff with Madrid, reported CNN.

But in a public statement in Barcelona, the regional capital, Puigdemont rejected the idea, apparently because he could not

win a majority in the Catalan parliament and many favour a declaration of independence.

Speaking just after Puigdemont, Spain's Deputy Prime Minister Soraya Saenz de Santamaria retorted that with the power seizure, the central government wanted "to open a new stage in which the law is respected".

The announcement came after day of confusion in Barcelona. Puigdemont delayed the statement after two of his MPs said they were unhappy with the plans for new elections.

Spain's crisis has plunged into its worst political crisis in decades on October 1, when Catalonia held an independence referendum, and Catalan and Spanish leaders in Madrid have been in political deadlock ever since.

Madrid slammed the referendum as illegal, but Catalan leaders took its results as a

mandate to declare a split from the country.

Madrid has scheduled a vote in the Spanish Senate for today, in which members will decide whether to suspend Catalonia's autonomy and put it under Madrid's control.

The measures would see Madrid taking control of Catalonia's government, police, purse and public broadcaster, until new elections are held.

Catalonia is one of 17 regions, with varying degrees of autonomy, that make

up Spain.

It was not clear whether the central government would back off after Puigdemont addressed.

Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy has threatened for weeks to impose direct rule on Catalonia as a way to quash Puigdemont's plan to declare independence.

He said Madrid had prepared all the documents to employ the never-before-used Article 155 of the country's Constitution.

ISRAEL'S 'GREATER JERUSALEM BILL'

Annexation plan means end of two-state solution: PLO

AFP, Jerusalem

A bill that critics say would amount to facto annexation of Israeli settlements surrounding Jerusalem is expected to go before ministers on Sunday, drawing harsh criticism from Palestinians and those hoping to salvage the two-state solution.

The bill would absorb major Israeli settlements currently in the occupied West Bank into Jerusalem by enlarging the city limits.

Its opponents argue that it is a step towards full unilateral annexation of the West Bank settlements affected - a move that would be sure to spark international outrage.

For the vast majority of the international community, the status of the Palestinians' settlements, built on land the status of the Palestinians' see as part of their future state, are to be decided in

peace negotiations.

Approval by a ministerial committee on Sunday would fast-track the 'Greater Jerusalem bill' through parliament.

Senior Palestinian official Hanan Ashrawi said the plan could kill hopes for an independent Palestinian state.

Ashrawi, a member of the Palestine Liberation Organisation's executive committee, said late Wednesday that "such efforts represent the end of the two-state solution."

Israel occupied the West Bank, including east Jerusalem, in the Six-Day War of 1967. It later annexed east Jerusalem in a move never recognised by the international community.

It sees the entire city as its indivisible capital, while the Palestinians want the eastern sector as the capital of their future state.

Regime shelling near Syria capital kills 8

AFP, Douma

Syrian regime shelling on the besieged rebel-held Eastern Ghouta area near Damascus yesterday killed at least eight civilians, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

A deal reached between rebel backer Turkey and regime allies Russia and Iran earlier this year has created so-called "de-escalation zones" in several parts of the country, including Eastern Ghouta, bringing a measure of calm.

One of the aims was to facilitate aid access to besieged areas but humanitarian conditions remain dire in Eastern Ghouta, with malnutrition cases spiking fresh concern in recent days.

More than 330,000 have been killed in Syria since the war began in March 2011.

Rice that can be grown in seawater

INDEPENDENT CO. UK

Scientists in China have developed several types of rice that can be grown seawater, potentially creating enough food for 200 million people.

Researchers have been trying to grow the grain in salty water for decades but have only now developed varieties that could be commercially viable.

The rice was grown in a field near the Yellow Sea coastal city of Qingdao in China's eastern Shandong province. 200 different types of the grain were planted to investigate which would grow best in salty conditions.

Sea water was pumped into the fields, diluted and then channelled into the rice paddies.

The scientists expected to produce 4.5 tonnes of rice per hectare but the crops exceed expectations, in one case delivering up to 9.3 tonnes per hectare.

"The test results greatly exceeded our expectations," Liu Jun, a researcher of the Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences, told Xinhua.

There are one million square kilometres of land in China where crops do not grow because of high salinity. Scientists hope the development of the rice will allow some of these areas to be used for agriculture.

If even a tenth of these areas were planted with rice, they could produce 50 million tonnes of food - enough to feed 200 million people and boost China's rice production by 20 percent.

Iraq, Syria eye last IS dens

AGENCIES

Iraqi forces launched an attack to drive Islamic State from the last territory it holds in Iraq yesterday and the Syrian army and its allies said they planned to march on the jihadis' last Syrian stronghold.

The separate assaults across the Iraqi-Syrian frontier aim to deal a final blow to the Islamic State "caliphate" that has crumbled this year in Syria and Iraq, with the group losing the cities of Mosul, Raqa and swathes of other territory.

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi said

Islamic State fighters would have "to choose between death and surrender," as he announced the offensive on the region of Rawa and Al-Qaim, which is located at the Syrian border.

The Iraqi air force dropped thousands of leaflets on the border area calling on militants to surrender and urging the population to stay away from their positions, according to a statement from the Joint Operations Command in Baghdad.

In a statement welcoming the offensive, the US-led coalition said approximately 1,500 Islamic State fighters were estimated to be still in the immediate vicinity of Al-Qaim.

In Syria, Islamic State has been driven back into a strip of territory along the Euphrates River by separate offensives waged by the Syrian government and its allies on the one hand, and by Syrian militia

units backed by the US-led coalition on the other.

Albu Kamal is located at the Iraqi border in the Syrian province of Deir al-Zor, just over the frontier from al-Qaim.

The Iraqi PM, whose forces battled jihadis in the west of the country and Kurds in the north, won the support of Iraqi leaders in talks in Tehran.

Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei gave his support for measures taken by the Iraqi government to defend the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Iraq.

Iraq PM wins Khamenei's support as war on IS, Kurd dispute hot up
Baghdad demands Kurds cancel secession bid as price for talks

Khamenei's office said in a statement after their meeting.

He also yesterday demanded that Kurds declare their independence referendum void, rejecting the Kurdish autonomous region's push to suspend its independence push to resolve a crisis through talks.

"We won't accept anything but its cancellation and the respect of the Constitution," Haider al-Abadi said in a statement during his visit to Tehran.

The Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) proposed on Wednesday an immediate ceasefire, a suspension of the referendum result and "starting an open dialogue with the federal government based on the Iraqi Constitution".



Indonesian police officers check dead bodies after an explosion at a fireworks factory at Kosambi village in Tangerang, Banten province, Indonesia, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Firworks factory blaze kill 47

REUTERS, Kosambi

Two explosions and a fire at a fireworks factory on the western outskirts of Indonesia's capital killed 47 people and injured 60 others yesterday, police said, and the death toll was expected to rise.

Thick plumes of dark smoke billowed from a factory warehouse in the Tangerang district, an industrial and manufacturing hub on the island of Java, TV broadcasts showed.

Hours later the burnt-out factory was still smouldering and there was a strong smell of burning plastic and chemicals.

Witnesses said there were two explosions at about 10 am and another about three hours later, both of which could be heard miles away, media said.

A grisly video of the scene inside the warehouse, widely shared on social media, showed onlookers counting badly charred bodies.

INDONESIA TRAGEDY

Dozens injured; death toll expected to rise as bodies are still being recovered

A search and rescue official, Deden Nurjaman, said bodies were still inside and he expected the death toll to climb. "People were burned so badly you couldn't see their faces... It was really bad," he said.

Industrial safety standards in Indonesia are often poor and rules widely enforced. There have been a series of major fires this year, notably that engulfed one of Jakarta's main

markets.

UNDERLINE WORKERS

Muslimah, a worker at Dakhiri said he had asked his supervisor to investigate reports of underfunded workers at the factory.

"If there were underfunded workers that would be a violation," Dakhiri told reporters, adding he could resolve the company's problem.

One of the first policemen on the scene, Raymond Masengi, told Metro TV police had broken holes in the factory wall to help people escape.

At the scene of yesterday's disaster, the grass was scorched over an area about 10 metres (yards) from the site.

Forensic police worked in the fading light to examine the debris and were trying to sweep floodlights as night fell.

Police said they were holding prayers for the victims.

Fiza, a doctor in the emergency unit at Tangerang General Hospital, told Metro TV he was treating seven people some of whom with burns to more than 80 percent of their bodies. Three were in critical condition.

A witness who lives around the corner from the factory said she heard an explosion "like a roar".

"We also found some who had died. There are 47 bodies," he said.

Witnesses said 10 people on the manifesto unaccounted for may have left with轻 injuries or might not have been working at the time.

The online video and media images of the PT Panca Buana Cahaya Suisse warehouse showed smouldering ash and debris, with parts of the roof missing.

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architects of the boycott, Saudi Arabia, along with the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Bahrain, accuse Qatar of financing terrorists and destabilising the region. Qatar firmly denies the allegations.

The Crown Prince also disclosed down on Saudi Arabia's contribution to the Yemen war.

"We're pursuing the Yemen war" until we can be sure that nothing will happen there like Hezbollah again," bin Salman told Reuters, referring to the Iran-backed Lebanese Shia group.

"Because Yemen is more dangerous than Lebanon," he added.

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