

S Korea proposes top-level talks with North

Says it's 'groundbreaking opportunity for peace'

AFP, Seoul

South Korea yesterday proposed high-level talks with Pyongyang on January 9, after the North's leader Kim Jong-Un called for better relations and said his country might attend the Winter Olympics in the South.

Kim used his annual New Year address to warn he has a "nuclear button" on his table, but sweetened his remarks by expressing an interest in dialogue and taking part in the Pyeongchang Games next month.

South Korea's unification minister Cho Myoung-Gyon told a press conference that Seoul was "reiterating our willingness to hold talks with the North at any time and place in any form".

"The government proposes to hold high-level government talks with North Korea on January 9 at the Peace House in Panmunjom," Cho said, referring to a truce village on the border between the two Koreas.

"We hope that the South and North can sit face to face and discuss the participation of the North Korean delegation at the Pyeongchang Games as well as other issues of mutual interest for the improvement of inter-Korean ties."

The Koreas, divided by a Demilitarised Zone since the end of the 1950-53 Korean War, last held high-level talks in 2015 to try to ease tensions.

Those talks failed to reach an agreement.

"Just the fact that they are meeting will be meaningful because it signals an attempt on both sides to improve relations," said Koh Yu-Hwan, a political science professor at Dongguk University.

But once they sit down, the North could put Seoul in a difficult position by making unacceptable demands such as an end to its annual joint military drills with the United States, Koh added.

"What North Korea is trying to do is re-establish its relations as a nuclear state (with Seoul). The South's dilemma is whether we can accept that."

South Korean President Moon Jae-In, who has long favoured engagement to ease tensions with the North, earlier yesterday welcomed Kim's suggestion of an opportunity for dialogue.

However, he indicated that improvements in ties must go hand in hand with steps towards denuclearisation of the North.

'POSITIVE RESPONSE'

North Korea has rattled the international community in recent months with multiple missile launches and its sixth and most powerful nuclear test -- purportedly of a hydrogen bomb.

It has shrugged off a raft of new sanctions and heightened rhetoric from Washington as it drives forward with its weapons programme, which it says is for defence against US aggression.

Kim's comments on Monday were the first indication of North Korea's willingness to take part in the Winter Games from February 9-25.

Moon called them a "positive response" to Seoul's hopes that the Pyeongchang Olympics would be a "groundbreaking opportunity for peace" and urged officials to come up with measures to realise the North's participation.

Beijing, Pyongyang's main ally, welcomed the



Demonstrators at the University of Tehran. Violent demonstrations have rocked Iran since Thursday last week, leaving more than 21 people dead. Yesterday, Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei blamed the country's "enemies" for the unrest. Story on page 16. PHOTO: CNN

Pakistan summons US envoy over Trump tweet

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan has summoned the US ambassador in a rare public rebuke after Donald Trump threatened to cut aid to Islamabad over "lies" about militancy.

Ambassador David Hale was asked to attend the foreign ministry on Monday night, after Islamabad responded angrily to the US President's allegations that it provided safe havens for militants -- the latest dispute to rock their alliance.

A US embassy spokesman confirmed yesterday Hale met officials but had no comment on what was said.

There was no immediate response from foreign ministry officials, but the National Security Council, which is chaired by the Prime Minister, was holding a meeting later yesterday, according to a tweet by a military spokesman.

Trump used his first tweet of 2018 to tear into Islamabad.

"The United States has foolishly given Pakistan more than 33 billion dollars in aid over the last 15 years, and they have given us nothing but lies & deceit, thinking of our leaders as fools," he said.

Indian doctors on strike over medicine plan

AFP, New Delhi

Doctors across India went on strike yesterday over a controversial bill that would allow practitioners of alternative therapies such as homeopathy to practise as medical doctors.

More than 300,000 private and public doctors in the country of 1.25 billion cancelled all outpatient services, forcing the government to delay a planned vote on the controversial bill in parliament.

The bill proposes to reform the country's ailing healthcare system and address a chronic shortage of doctors, particularly in rural areas.

Boko Haram claims credit

AFP, Nigeria

Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau released a video message yesterday claiming a series of attacks in northeast Nigeria during the festive season.

The shadowy leader released his first video message in months amid a surge in violence casting doubt on the Nigerian government's claim that the jihadist group is defeated.

"We are in good health and nothing has happened to us," said Shekau in the 31-minute video message spoken in the Hausa language common across northern Nigeria.

"Nigerian troops, police and those creating mischief against us can't do anything against us, and you will gain nothing," he said.

"We carried out the attacks in Maiduguri, in Gaboru, in Damboa. We carried out all these attacks."

The video then shows footage from a Christmas Day attack on a military checkpoint in Molai village on the outskirts of the northeast Nigerian city of Maiduguri, which the military said was thwarted by troops after one hour of battle.

Boko Haram fighters in torn clothes were shown shooting from the back of battered pickup trucks.

Two dead as storm hits Philippines

AFP, Manila

Two people were killed and thousands fled strong winds and floods as a tropical depression hit the central Philippines yesterday, following deadly back-to-back storms during the Christmas season.

The deaths were reported on Cebu island, where an elderly woman was killed in a landslide while a man died after he hit his head on the pavement as the storm cut off electricity in the area.

Tropical Storm Kai-Tak killed 47 people in the central Philippines last month, while Tropical Storm Tembin killed 240 on the southern island of Mindanao.



Kim Jong-Un Moon Jae-In



Abubakar Shekau



VIOLENT PROTEST IN MUMBAI

AFP, Mumbai

Republican Party of India (RPI) supporters gesture towards police-men after a protest turned violent in Mumbai yesterday. The demonstration comes a day after the death of young Dalit activist in Maharashtra's Pune district following an altercation between two groups during celebrations to mark the bicentenary of a British-Peshwa war.

PHOTO: AFP

Berlin prison hit by 3 escapes in a week

AFP, Berlin

Berlin authorities came under fire yesterday after a single city prison was hit by three jailbreaks or walk-outs in a week, with five inmates still on the run.

Tabloid-style Bild daily labelled the security lapses "incomprehensible", city-state politicians urged the justice minister to step down, and Twitter users mocked the penal facility's "open door" policy.

The first group escape saw four inmates aged 27 to 38 flee last Thursday from the Ploetzensee jail facility, now widely dubbed the capital's "scandal prison".

The convicts doing time for theft, extortion and aggravated assault were able to use an angle grinder and a huge hammer from their prison workshop to break out through a ventilation shaft before slipping underneath a fence to freedom.

A perimeter surveillance camera captured their escape, but wardens did not view the footage in real time and took 41 minutes to sound the alarm.

On Friday it emerged during a head-count that a fifth prisoner, aged 30, had failed to return from day release on Thursday.

And on Monday morning, New Year's Day, it was learnt that two more prisoners had slipped out overnight through a cell window, with one however reporting back hours later.

The pair had been held under an open-prison policy that allows detainees to go to work during the day but obliges them to spend nights behind bars.

Top Hollywood women launch anti-harassment initiative

AFP, Washington

More than 300 top women in Hollywood -- from Meryl Streep and Jennifer Lawrence to Emma Thompson and Cate Blanchett -- unveiled an initiative Monday to tackle pervasive sexual harassment in workplaces, calling special attention to their "sisters" in less than glamorous blue-collar jobs.

The initiative, dubbed Time's Up, caps a year in which the Harvey Weinstein sexual misconduct scandal touched off a deluge of allegations that brought down powerful men in entertainment, politics and the media, prompting companies, government agencies and even the US federal court system to re-examine harassment policies.

bers to the cause of women in less prominent fields, urging support and respect for farmworkers and others whose humble positions leave them vulnerable and voiceless.

"We fervently urge the media covering the disclosures by people in Hollywood to spend equal time on the myriad experiences of individuals working in less glamorized and valorized trades," the group says in its full-page ad.

"To every woman employed in agriculture who has had to fend off unwanted sexual advances from her boss, every housekeeper who has tried to escape an assaultive guest, every janitor trapped nightly in a building with a predatory supervisor, every waitress grabbed by a customer and expected to take it with a smile... we stand with you. We support you."

Last month, the head of Ford Motor Company apologized to employees at two factories in Chicago and promised changes, after a scathing expose by the Times detailed pervasive harassment and mistreatment of women at the plants dating back to the 1990s. It was one of the first major media investigations into sexual harassment in blue-collar workplaces.

Among the specific steps it announced, Time's Up has established a legal defence fund that, in just 12 days, has raised \$13.4 million toward a \$15 million goal aimed at providing legal aid for women and men who were sexually harassed, assaulted or abused in the workplace.

Israel targets Hamas sites

AFP, Gaza City

Israeli aircraft attacked Hamas bases in Gaza early yesterday in response to a rocket from the Palestinian enclave targeting southern Israel hours before, officials said.

The aircraft targeted a "military compound belonging to the terrorist organisation Hamas," a statement from the army read.

Palestinian security sources said the strikes were in Khan Younes in the south and Deir al-Balah in central Gaza, causing damage but no casualties.

On Monday night, a rocket hit a town in southern Israel, causing no damage or casualties.



Street performers dance on Tverskaya street during a festival marking the New Year and Christmas in central Moscow yesterday. Russia celebrates the Orthodox Christmas on January 8. PHOTO: AFP