

N Korea fires 'projectile' as US envoy visits South

AFP, Seoul

North Korea welcomed a US envoy's visit to Seoul by firing at least one projectile for the second time in a week yesterday, the South's military said, as Pyongyang seeks to up the ante in deadlocked nuclear negotiations with Washington.

The launch came after North Korea carried out a military drill and fired multiple projectiles on Saturday, with at least one believed to be a short-range missile.

It was also hours after the US Special Representative on North Korea, Stephen Biegun, arrived in Seoul late Wednesday for talks with South Korean officials on the allies' approach towards Pyongyang.

It is Biegun's first visit to Seoul since the Hanoi summit between US President Donald Trump and the North's leader Kim Jong Un collapsed without agreement on rolling back Pyongyang's nuclear programme in exchange for sanctions relief.

"We are still analysing whether it is a single or multiple projectiles," Joint Chiefs of Staff spokesman Kim Joon-rak told AFP, adding the launch fired in an eastward direction appeared to originate from Sino-ri in North Pyongan province.

The decades-old Sino-ri operational missile base, 75 kilometres (45 miles) northwest of Pyongyang, is one of North Korea's longest-running missile facilities and houses a regiment-sized unit equipped with Nodong-1 medium-range ballistic missiles, according to the Centre for Strategic & International Studies.

Anything fired from it in an easterly direction would have to cross the Korean peninsula before reaching the sea.

Biegun met his South Korean counterpart Lee Do-hoon for breakfast yesterday but much of his schedule was not made public.



Russian Yars RS-24 intercontinental ballistic missile systems roll through Red Square during the Victory Day military parade in downtown Moscow yesterday. Inset, Russian servicewomen march through Red Square during the Victory Day military parade. The two-day public holiday to celebrate the 1945 victory over Nazi Germany comes this year amid heightened tensions with the West and fears of a new Russia-US arms race.

PHOTO: AFP

Democrats, GOP lock horns

Trump Jr subpoenaed as Congress steps up battle with W House

AFP, Washington

The Russia probe plunged Washington into turmoil Wednesday as Donald Trump's son reportedly was ordered to testify before a Senate panel and the White House refused to release material on investigations into the president.

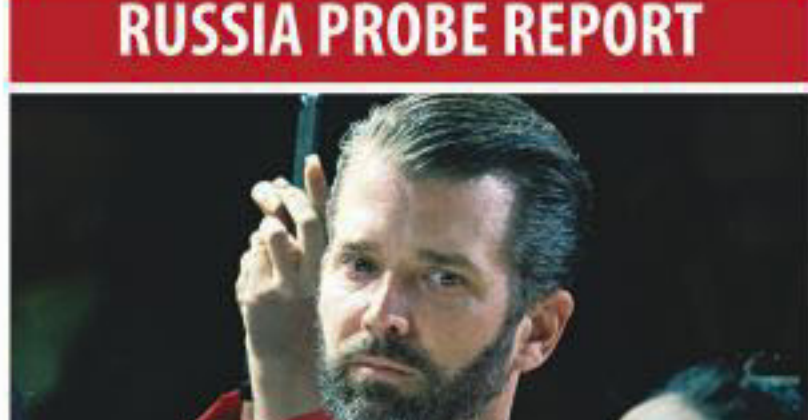
A day after the top Republican in Congress called the Russia probe "case closed," Trump's conflict with his Democratic opponents escalated to new heights as a House panel voted to hold the nation's Attorney General Bill Barr in contempt for refusing to turn over key documents.

Following a day of drama that included Trump asserting executive privilege for the first time in his presidency, the Republican-led Senate Intelligence Committee took the surprise step of issuing a subpoena to Donald Trump Jr to testify as part of its investigation into Russian election interference, US media reported.

It was the first known legal

summons issued to a member of the president's family to force testimony in the ongoing investigation, and comes after special counsel Robert Mueller declined to accuse Trump's 2016 campaign of criminal conspiracy to collude with the Russians.

RUSSIA PROBE REPORT



Trump Jr, 41, has testified voluntarily in private once to the committee, and was peppered with questions about a June 9, 2016 meeting at Trump Tower in New York that he and other campaign officials had with a Russian lawyer who had offered them dirt on Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton.

Committee aides would not confirm the subpoena or what they want to discuss with the president's eldest son, who currently helps run the Trump Organization.

Citing a person close to Trump Jr, The Wall Street Journal reported he had offered to answer questions in writing from the committee, and planned to fight the subpoena, which demands he testify in person.

The White House has been seeking to shield a large swathe of material -- including redacted portions of Mueller's report -- subpoenaed by lawmakers seeking to exert their oversight responsibility.

The rare move to invoke executive privilege came as the House Judiciary Committee took its most substantive step yet against a member of the Trump administration by approving a contempt motion against Barr.

"This was a very grave and momentous step we were forced to take today," committee chairman Jerry Nadler said after the party-line vote.

CONSPIRACY, REBELLION AND TREASON CHARGES

Juan Guaido's deputy arrested in Venezuela

REUTERS, Caracas

Venezuelan intelligence agents detained opposition leader Juan Guaido's congressional deputy on Wednesday, using a tow truck to drag his vehicle away with him inside, prompting the US government to warn of "consequences" if he was not released.

The SEBIN intelligence agency seized Edgar Zambrano, vice president of the opposition-controlled National Assembly, which Guaido heads, in the first arrest of a lawmaker since Guaido tried to spark a military uprising last week to bring down President Nicolas Maduro's government.

Venezuela's pro-Maduro Constituent Assembly agreed on Tuesday to strip Zambrano and six other lawmakers of their parliamentary immunity to allow their future prosecution. The opposition does not recognize the assembly's decisions.

The Supreme Court had earlier accused those lawmakers of conspiracy, rebellion and treason, and accused another three opposition legislators of the same crimes on Wednesday.

The opposition says Maduro has stacked the court with his own supporters, while the US government this week threatened to sanction all its members.

Zambrano is deputy to National Assembly speaker Juan Guaido, who is recognized as the country's leader by more than 50 states, and who organized the April 30 revolt.

Pope makes reporting of sex abuse obligatory

AFP, Vatican City

Pope Francis yesterday passed a measure to oblige those who know about sex abuse in the Catholic Church to report it to their superiors, following a global clerical paedophilia scandal.

Every diocese in the world will now be obliged to have a system for the reporting of abuse, under a new law published by the Vatican -- but the requirement will not apply to secrets revealed to priests in the confessional.

It is time to learn from the "bitter lessons of the past", Francis said in the text of the legal decree.

It follows a series of clerical assault cases in countries ranging from Australia to Chile, Germany and the US.

The "Motu Proprio", a legal document issued under the pope's personal authority, declares that anyone who has knowledge of abuse, or suspects it, is "obliged to report (it) promptly" to the Church, using "easily accessible



systems".

The law only applies within the Church and has no force to oblige individuals to report abuse to civil authorities.

Under the new measure, every diocese around the world is obliged by June 2020 to create a system for the reporting of sexual abuse by clerics, the use of child pornography and cover-ups of abuse.

The document focuses particularly on the sexual or psychological abuse of children and vulnerable adults, but also targets sexual abuse and violence resulting from an abuse of authority -- such as the exploitation of nuns by priests.

Malaysia criticised for failures on rights reforms

Malaysia's government yesterday faced criticism for failing to repeal repressive laws and backtracking on promises to improve human rights a year after sweeping to power with a reformist agenda. The Pact of Hope alliance had pledged to do away with repressive laws, such as the colonial-era sedition act which critics say is used to target political dissent, and legislation that allowed for indefinite detention without trial. But the laws are still in place, and authorities have also backed away from a post-election pledge to abolish the death penalty. In addition, the government did a U-turn on a plan to join the International Criminal Court after protests from opposition politicians and a powerful Islamic ruler. "The government should recognise that further delays in ending abusive systems and laws will only mean further harm for the Malaysian people," said Phil Robertson, deputy Asia director for Human Rights Watch.

South Africa ANC takes early lead in polls results

Nelson Mandela's African National Congress (ANC) surged into the lead in early official results yesterday with 55 percent of the vote in the first electoral test of President Cyril Ramaphosa's bid to reinvigorate the ruling party. With just over a fifth of voting districts tallied, the South African Election Commission put ANC well ahead, with its closest rival the Democratic Alliance trailing with a distant 26 percent. The party that wins the most seats in parliament selects the country's president, who will be sworn in on May 25. Support for the ANC has fallen in every election since 2004 with the party taking 54 percent in 2016 municipal elections, compared with 62 percent in 2014's national vote.

Sacred oxen predict 'abundant' Thai harvest

Thai astrologers yesterday predicted an "abundant" harvest after a pair of sacred white oxen munched on grass and rice, and slurped up water in an annual ritual watched by newly crowned King Maha Vajiralongkorn. The monarch, seated next to his new Queen Suthida, observed the "royal ploughing ceremony" symbolising Thailand's fortunes. The colourful procession, led by two Hindu Brahmin priests, saw two white oxen walk a field to the sound of blaring trumpets. The ceremony, which dates to the 13th century, marks the start of the growing season for Thailand, one of the world's top rice exporters. Royal soothsayers base their predictions on which foods the animals choose to eat after the ploughing. The oxen are offered banana leaf-wrapped bowls of rice, maize, green beans, sesame, liquor, water, and grass.



SOURCE: AFP



Palestinian and Arab Israeli protesters wave Palestinian flags as they march for the right of return for refugees who fled their homes or were expelled during the 1948 war that followed the creation of the state of Israel, during the 71th anniversary of the Jewish state's founding, near Umm al-Fahm in northern Israel, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

US seizes N Korean ship for 'violating sanctions'

REUTERS

The United States has for the first time seized a North Korean cargo ship it accused of illicit coal shipments in violation of US and United Nations sanctions, the US Justice Department announced yesterday.

The ship, known as the "Wise Honest", was first detained by Indonesia in April 2018. Under an unusual US civil forfeiture action, the vessel is now in the possession of the United States and is currently approaching US territorial waters, a Justice Department official said.

The announcement comes after North Korea fired what appeared to be two short-range missiles yesterday, its second such test in less than a week and an apparent protest by leader Kim Jong Un after US President Donald Trump rejected his calls for sanctions relief at a summit in February.

The Justice Department said in a statement that the Wise Honest was used by Korea Songi Shipping Company, which it accused of paying US dollars through unwitting US financial institutions - in violation of US laws - for improvements, equipment purchases, and service expenditures for the vessel.

"Payments totalling more than \$750,000 were transmitted through accounts at a US financial institution in connection with the March 2018 shipment of coal on board the Wise Honest," the statement said.

The North Korean mission to the United Nations did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The UN Security Council has unanimously strengthened sanctions on North Korea since 2006 in a bid to choke funding for Pyongyang's nuclear and ballistic missile programs, banning exports including coal, iron, lead, textiles and seafood.

World just got a bit more dangerous

CNN ONLINE

The unraveling of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal is now accelerating with Iran's announcement Wednesday that it will stop complying with some parts of the agreement.

The stage is set for a confrontation between an unabashedly bellicose US and an equally defiant Iran. It may all be, as some analysts have suggested, a "game of chicken," but this sort of "game" also can result in a head-on collision.

All the ingredients are in place for a confrontation that could be the most significant outbreak of warfare since the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq.

The likely architect of this high-risk approach is US National Security Adviser John Bolton, a hawk's hawk who has no regrets about cheerleading Washington's 2003 Iraq catastrophe, and seems equally determined to take his country to the brink with Iran.

This is a man who has long consorted with the cultish Mujahadeen-e-Khalq Iranian opposition group (until 2012 on the State Department list of foreign terrorist organizations), and who in 2015 wrote an op-ed in the New York Times entitled, "To Stop Iran's Bomb, Bomb Iran."

The "intelligence" that prompted Bolton to issue his statement on the deployment of the

US THREATS AND IRAN'S RETREAT FROM NUCLEAR DEAL



American aircraft carrier group led by the USS Abraham Lincoln reportedly came from Israeli National Security Adviser Meir Ben Shabbat, who met his US counterpart in Washington last month.

It's all a big echo chamber in which the Trump administration hears only what it wants to hear. Until Wednesday's announcement out of Tehran, Iran had continued to comply with the JCPOA -- as the nuclear deal is known -- according to the most recent assessment this February by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

It was the United States, not Iran, that unilaterally pulled out of the agreement a year ago, much to the consternation of the other signatories to the agreement -- the UK, France, Germany, Russia and China.

Since last year, the US has ratcheted up sanctions on Iran, making it ever more difficult for Tehran to sell its oil, and making the life of ordinary Iranians more difficult.

Furthermore, Iran is not Saddam Hussein's Iraq, which by 2003 was, militarily, a shadow of its former self. Iran is a regional superpower, a country of more than 80 million souls, which despite decades of sanctions, has managed to develop a significant industrial and scientific infrastructure and has bolstered its influence throughout the region by backing its allies in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and, to more limited extent, Yemen.

For sure, the Iranian military is no match for the US. Yet its regional allies, particularly

Hezbollah, have proven their mettle in war.

In 2006, Israel fought the Iranian-trained and armed group with the stated intention of crushing it. Nothing of the sort happened. Israeli forces were fought to a standstill, and eventually forced to withdraw without achieving any of their goals.

In 1980, then-Iraqi President Saddam Hussein invaded Iran, with implicit US backing, in the hopes that the Islamic Republic, in the throes of post-revolutionary unrest, would quickly collapse. It didn't. Iranian patriotism trumped all else, and Iraq was locked for the next eight years in a brutal war.

And of course, Iran sits on the Straits of Hormuz, through which about a fifth of the world's oil flows. Any disruption caused by war -- or even heightened tensions -- could send the world economy into a tailspin.

But Washington seems intent on ploughing ahead, perhaps entertaining visions of some sort of grand plan to remake the Middle East -- think Jared Kushner's much-awaited "Deal of the Century" -- to vanquish once and for all its perceived regional foes and bring about a Pax Americana. The chances of success are slim. The chances of yet another historic disaster, however, are spectacularly high.