

KIM ORDERS NUCLEAR ARSENAL ON 'STANDBY'

SEOUL: Leader Kim Jong-Un has ordered North Korea's nuclear arsenal to be readied for pre-emptive use at any time, in an expected escalation of military rhetoric following the UN Security Council's adoption of tough new sanctions on Pyongyang. The North's nuclear warheads must be deployed "on standby so as to be fired at any moment," Kim was quoted as saying by the North's official KCNA news agency yesterday.

He also warned that the situation on the divided Korean peninsula had become so dangerous that the North needed to shift its military strategy to one of "pre-emptive attack". Such bellicose rhetoric is almost routine for North Korea at times of elevated tensions. While the North is known to have a small stockpile of nuclear warheads, experts are divided about its ability to mount them on a working missile delivery system. Washington downplayed Kim's threat as posturing. "We have not seen North Korea test or demonstrate the ability to miniaturize a nuclear weapon and put it on an ICBM (intercontinental ballistic missile)," a US defense official told AFP. Still, the official added, "our forces are ready to counter-eliminate strikes if necessary".

'Stern Punishment'

In Seoul, President Park Geun-Hye promised South Korea would mete out "stern punishment" in the event of any North Korea provocation as she warned of a "fiercer" backlash than usual from Pyongyang over the latest UN sanctions. According to KCNA, Kim made his comments while monitoring the test firing of a new, high-calibre multiple rocket launcher on Thursday, just hours after the UN Security Council unanimously adopted the US-drafted resolution penalizing the North for its fourth nuclear test in January and long-range rocket launch last month.

South Korea's defence ministry said the North had fired half a dozen rockets about 100-150 km into the sea off its eastern coast on Thursday. In a clear threat to the neighboring South, Kim said the new rocket launcher should be "promptly deployed" along with other "recently developed" weaponry. In the wake of the "gangster-like" UN resolution pushed by the United States and its South Korean ally, North Koreans are now "waiting for an order of combat to annihilate the enemy with their surging wrath", he added.



North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un inspects the test-firing of a new-type large-caliber multiple launch rocket system at an undisclosed location. — AFP

The Security Council resolution adopted late Wednesday laid out the toughest sanctions imposed on Pyongyang to date over its nuclear weapons program and will, if implemented effectively, apply significant economic

pressure on Kim's regime. It breaks new ground by sanctioning specific sectors key to the North Korean economy and seeking to undermine the North's use of, and access to, international transport systems. — AFP

'MISSING' BOOKSELLER BACK IN HONG KONG

HONG KONG: One of five "missing" Hong Kong booksellers who was detained on the mainland returned to the city yesterday and met police, the government said, in a case that has provoked fears of increasing Chinese interference in the semi-autonomous region. Lui Por, who has been missing since October, was among three of the booksellers who Hong Kong police said earlier this week would be released on bail. "Police met with Lui Por, who returned to Hong Kong from the mainland, this morning," a brief government statement released late yesterday said.

"Lui requested to have his missing persons case closed and expressed that there was no need for assistance from the Hong Kong government or police," it said, adding he refused to provide any more information. Hong Kong police had said that Lui and his counterparts Cheung Chi Ping and Lam Wing Kee would all be released on bail. However, police yesterday were not able to immediately provide information about Lam and Cheung when contacted by AFP.

An unnamed source quoted by the South China Morning Post said Lui was not handed over to the city's police by mainland authorities. Instead, Hong Kong police were sent to meet Lui at his Hong Kong home, according to the newspaper. "He told officers that he was safe and he did not need any assistance from the police," the source said. Meanwhile, pro-democracy lawmaker Albert Ho said Lui "must be very scared" to say he wanted to drop his case. "It's just to show the mainland authorities that he will keep quiet," Ho told AFP.

Tearful Confessions

The five booksellers from Hong Kong's Mighty Current publishing house, known for its salacious titles critical of Beijing, went missing last year, only to turn up in mainland China. One who apparently disappeared from Hong Kong, Lee Bo, appeared on television on Monday and insisted he had not been abducted by mainland authorities. In the Phoenix TV interview, Lee said he had "resorted to illegal immigration" to get to the mainland as he did not want to draw attention to his visit and that he made the trip so he could cooperate in an investigation.

The other four booksellers, who are under criminal investigation on the mainland, also appeared on Phoenix Sunday admitting to smuggling illicit books into China. In their first appearance since they were detained, Cheung, Lui and Lam blamed the company's illegal book trade on colleague Gui Minhai in their interviews. Gui, a Swedish citizen who was among the five missing, confessed he had "explored ways to circumvent official inspections in China", in the interview Sunday. — AFP

MAHATHIR JOINS WITH OLD ENEMIES TO PUSH OUT PM

MOVE BRINGS TOGETHER MAHATHIR AND ANWAR

KUALA LUMPUR: Former Malaysian leader Mahathir Mohamad yesterday joined hands with long-standing foes, including the party of the jailed Anwar Ibrahim, to crank up pressure on scandal-plagued Prime Minister Najib Razak to quit, marking a seismic political shift. In a dramatic flourish, Mahathir read a statement signed by 58 politicians and anti-corruption activists at a news conference where he was flanked by opposition leaders and some members of the ruling party he has now quit.

"We call upon all Malaysians, irrespective of race, political affiliation, creed or parties, young and old, to join us in saving Malaysia from the government headed by Najib Razak," the statement said. One of those beside Mahathir was a close aide of his former protege, opposition leader Anwar, with whom he fell out when he was prime minister in the late 1990s. Anwar issued a statement from prison a day earlier, saying he would "support the position" of those in civil society, political parties and individuals, including Mahathir, in the push to remove Najib.

Besides demanding the resignation of the prime minister, the so-called "core" group demanded the removal of those who had covered up misdeeds, the repeal of laws that violate fundamental rights and the restoration of institutions it said had been undermined, including the police and anti-graft agency. The rainbow alliance had come together under Mahathir because its members were not powerful individually to loosen Najib's grip on power, said Oh Ei Sun, a senior fellow of the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore. "Dr Mahathir is pulling together everybody with the lowest common denominator - dislike of Najib, as he did not succeed in earlier attempts to topple Najib," he said.



KUALA LUMPUR: Former Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad speaks during a press conference with members of the opposition yesterday. — AFP

A government spokesman criticized the move by Mahathir and his former enemies, saying it "demonstrated the depth of their political opportunism and desperation". "There is an existing mechanism to change the government and prime minister. It's called a general election," the spokesman said. "And it is the only mechanism that is lawful, democratic and fulfils the people's will." Najib has faced sustained pressure to resign since the middle of last year over allegations of corruption linked to the debt-laden state fund 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB), and deposits into his private accounts worth around \$680 million.

He has denied any wrongdoing, maintains that he did not use the funds for personal gain, and this year he was cleared of any criminal offence or corruption. The 1MDB scandal has fuelled a sense of crisis in a country under economic strain from slumping oil prices and a prolonged slide in its currency last year.

Mahathir, Malaysia's longest-serving

leader, was once Najib's patron but has become his fiercest critic and, because of his enduring popularity, a thorn in the side of the prime minister. Last week, he quit the United Malays National Organisation, which has led every ruling coalition since Malaysia's independence in 1957, saying it had become Najib's party and he did not want to be associated with corruption.

Also at yesterday's news conference was Muhyiddin Yassin, who was sacked as deputy prime minister last year after he openly questioned Najib on the 1MDB scandal. Another was Lim Kit Siang, an opposition leader and longtime nemesis of Mahathir. Most striking was the attendance of Mohamed Azmin Ali, a right-hand man of Anwar, whom Mahathir sacked as deputy prime minister in 1998 and had jailed on sodomy charges that many observers said were politically motivated. A year ago, Anwar was jailed again on sodomy charges he said were concocted by Najib's government to eliminate the threat he posed to its hold on power. — Reuters