

AFTER NORTH KOREA'S BIG PARADE, WHAT'S NEXT?

PYONGYANG: North Korea's big day, the anniversary of the birth of its founding leader, Kim Il Sung, came and went with no underground nuclear test by the North, and no pre-emptive strikes off the deck of the USS Carl Vinson aircraft carrier sent to waters off the Korean Peninsula by President Donald Trump. Just hours before Vice President Mike

Pence began his visit to Seoul yesterday, Pyongyang fired off a ballistic missile - but it appears to have exploded seconds after it got off the ground. So, all clear?

Well, yes and no. Though tensions had been rising dangerously between Washington and Pyongyang in the lead-up to the April 15 anniversary, the biggest holi-

day of the year in North Korea, the heightened rhetoric and saber-rattling on both sides could begin to cool down - a pattern that has been common in recent years, especially in the spring, when the U.S. and South Korea stage their huge annual war games.

But this year, there is a new issue. In an interview with The Associated Press, a senior North Korean official said Friday that Pyongyang has determined that Trump is "more vicious and aggressive" than his predecessor, Barack Obama. And Pyongyang is vowing it won't back down. A look at why Trump's North Korea problem isn't likely to go away anytime soon:

Missiles on parade

Though North Korea didn't launch any missiles to mark the anniversary day, it did show them off in a military parade - and in a surprising number and variety. Experts believe the arsenal displayed in Saturday's parade included a new kind of short-range cruise missile, probably for shoreline defenses. North Korea unveiled its latest submarine-launched ballistic missile and a version of the same missile that can be launched from land-based launchers - both of which use solid fuel and present a far greater challenge to find and destroy before they're fired off. And it showed off canisters that seemed in line with what would be required for an intercontinental ballistic missile, which is Washington's greatest concern.

That's a kind of two-fer for the North. The

canisters are used for "cold launches," meaning they protect the mobile launch vehicle when the missiles are deployed. But they also hide what's inside, so more analysis and guesswork from the parade display and future test launches will be required before conclusions are made about where North Korea's ICBM development really stands. Clearly, however, the focus on missiles large and small at the parade was meant to send a signal that the North is able to project its power well beyond its own borders. At the very least, to US military bases in Japan. At the most, to the mainland United States itself.

More, better nukes

Physicist and North Korea nuclear watcher David Albright, of the Institute for Science and International Security, estimated in a report last week provided to The Associated Press that through 2020, North Korea will have enough plutonium and weapon-grade uranium for about 25-50 nuclear weapons. But he also noted that the North has several options to diversify and expand its capabilities.

It could, for example, use its experimental light water reactor to have enough plutonium and weapon-grade uranium "for up to 60 nuclear weapons by the end of 2020," Albright said. "Significantly higher estimates are possible if North Korea significantly expands its gas centrifuge program and dramatically boosts its production and separation of plutonium over what is assumed in

the current analysis," he added. Moreover, Albright said, continued underground testing will provide the North with opportunities to significantly improve its ability to make weapons that require less fissile, are more compact and have higher explosive yields. Developing a thermonuclear weapon - an H-bomb - is a declared priority of North Korea. According to Albright, it appears capable of doing so. And, at the current pace, that could be on Trump's watch.

Another anniversary coming up

April 15 isn't the only big anniversary in North Korea this month. The country's military marks the anniversary of its founding on April 25, and some experts believe the chances of a nuclear test or missile launch around that date may be higher than they were on Kim Il Sung's birth anniversary. There are two reasons for that. April 15 is intended to be focused completely on honoring Kim Il Sung and by extension his son, Kim Jong Il, and grandson, current leader Kim Jong Un. A test or launch on that day could distract from that focus, especially if it were to fail.

The second reason is that the April 25 anniversary is explicitly a military observation. While a failure would still be embarrassing, it wouldn't be quite as bad. More likely, if there is still going to be a test or launch designed to make a political statement, it could be timed just before or after April 25 to further dilute the potential PR impact of a failure. —AP



PYONGYANG: In this Saturday, April 15, 2017, file photo, a soldiers march across Kim Il Sung Square during a military parade in Pyongyang, North Korea to celebrate the 105th birth anniversary of Kim Il Sung, the country's late founder and grandfather of current ruler Kim Jong Un. —AP

NORTH KOREA MISSILE TEST FAILS BEFORE PENCE VISIT

'THE MISSILE BLEW UP ALMOST IMMEDIATELY'

SEOUL: Visiting US Vice President Mike Pence described North Korea's failed missile test yesterday as a "provocation" and assured South Korea of Washington's full support against the threat from its volatile neighbor. Pyongyang launched the missile hours before Pence arrived in Seoul for talks on curbing the North's weapons programs as fears grow that it is planning another nuclear test. But US officials said the missile exploded seconds after it was fired.

siles-including a suspected new intercontinental ballistic missile.

"The missile blew up almost immediately," the US Defense Department said of yesterday's early-morning launch from near Sinpo on the North's east coast. The type of missile was not clear. The North has a habit of test-firing missiles to mark major dates such as Saturday's 105th anniversary of the birth of the nation's founder Kim Il-Sung, or as gestures of defi-

assure you that under President Trump's leadership our resolve has never been stronger, our commitment to this historic alliance with the courageous people of South Korea has never been stronger and with your help and God's help freedom will ever prevail on this peninsula," he said.

Tough stance

Last August a submarine-launched ballistic missile tested

will prevent Pyongyang from developing a nuclear-tipped ballistic missile capable of reaching the mainland United States. With speculation mounting that the North is preparing to conduct a sixth nuclear test, he sent an aircraft carrier-led strike group to the Korean peninsula. But a White House foreign policy adviser travelling with Pence played down Sunday's test, saying the missile-probably a medium-range one-failed after about four to five seconds.

While Washington had a "wide array of tools" at the president's disposal, "for this particular case, if they (North Korea) took the time and energy to launch a missile that failed, we don't need to expend any resources against that." The North has reiterated its constant refrain that it is ready for war with the US, and its army Friday vowed a "merciless" response to any US provocation. Recent satellite images suggest its main nuclear site is "primed and ready," according to specialist US website 38North.

China, the North's sole major ally, and Russia have both urged restraint. China's most senior diplomat Yang Jiechi and US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson exchanged views on the situation on the Korean peninsula by phone on Sunday, Beijing's official Xinhua news agency said. The White House adviser said Trump and China's President Xi Jinping had discussed a number of steps at their summit this month and "we've seen the Chinese already take some initial steps towards that"-citing the turning back of coal ships from North Korea.

The UN Security Council has imposed six sets of sanctions against the North since 2006, when it staged the first of its five nuclear tests. All have failed to halt its drive for what it insists are defensive weapons. On Monday Pence is scheduled to meet Acting President Hwang Kyo-Ahn for talks expected to focus on the North's weapons programs and a controversial US missile defense system known as THAAD. —AFP



SEOUL: US Vice President Mike Pence (C) and his wife Karen Pence (in white jacket) inspect the honour guard upon their arrival at the National Cemetery. —AFP

"This morning's provocation from the North is just the latest reminder of the risks each one of you face each and every day in the defense of the freedom of the people of South Korea and the defense of America in this part of the world," Pence told US military families at an Easter dinner. Some 28,500 US troops are stationed in the South. The latest launch came a day after the North held a defiant massive military parade in Pyongyang which showcased nearly 60 mis-

siles-including a suspected new intercontinental ballistic missile.

ance when top US officials visit the region. South Korea's foreign ministry said that by conducting the latest test just a day after displaying a series of missiles, "North Korea has threatened the whole world." US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis said President Donald Trump had been briefed on the latest test but had "no further comment", while at the Easter dinner at Yongsan military base, Pence brought greetings for the troops from Trump. "Let me

from Sinpo flew 500 kilometers towards Japan. North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un hailed that test as the "greatest success" and said it brought the US mainland within range of a mobile delivery system. Pyongyang's rogue atomic ambitions have come into sharp focus in recent weeks, with Trump vowing a tough stance against the North and threatening unilateral action if China failed to help curb its neighbor's nuclear program. Trump has repeatedly said he



COLOMBO: Sri Lankan men walk back after erecting a white flag on top of a garbage mound following the garbage dump collapse in Meetotamulla, on the outskirts of Colombo. —AP

HOPE FADES FOR SRI LANKA MISSING, DEATH TOLL AT 23

COLOMBO: Hopes of finding anyone alive under a collapsed mountain of garbage in Sri Lanka's capital faded yesterday as the death toll reached 23 with another six reported missing, police said. Hundreds of soldiers, backed by heavy earth moving equipment were digging through the rubbish and the wreckage of some 145 homes that were destroyed when a side of the 300-foot high dump crashed on Friday.

"The rescue is fast becoming a recovery operation," a senior police official at the site said. "It is difficult to imagine anyone could survive under these toxic conditions." He said six people were reported missing after Friday's disaster at Kolonnawa on the northeastern edge of the capital. The Colombo National hospital said four children aged between 11 and 15 were among the 23 people killed. Hospital spokeswoman Pushpa Soysa said a man and a woman pulled out of the dump on Friday were in intensive care while another 11 were also still in hospital.

Police have stepped up security in the area following reports of looting and said they arrested 18 men suspected of stealing victims' belongings. President Maithripala Sirisena ordered hundreds

of troops to search for survivors and bolster rescue efforts of the fire department. Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, who is visiting Japan, said arrangements had been made to remove the garbage dump, but it came crashing down before relocation work could begin. Wickremesinghe said Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe offered help with the recovery effort and a technical team would be sent to Sri Lanka to evaluate the situation.

About 800 tons of solid waste is added per day to the open dump. Police said a total of 145 homes, mostly shacks, were destroyed when the garbage mountain came crashing down following heavy rain the previous day and a fire hours earlier. More than 600 people have been given temporary shelter at a government-run school in the area as authorities looked for alternative accommodation for those living near the dump. Many residents had evacuated their homes before the disaster because of the heavy rain. Sri Lanka's parliament was warned recently that the 23 million tonnes of garbage rotting at Kolonnawa was a serious health hazard. Efforts are under way to generate electricity using solid waste as fuel. —AFP

PAKISTAN PROBES CLERICS AFTER STUDENT KILLED FOR BLASPHEMY

PESHAWAR: Pakistani police opened a hate speech investigation involving two Muslim clerics yesterday after the killing of a university student over allegations he committed blasphemy. The clerics are accused of attempting to disrupt the funeral of student Mashal Khan, who was beaten to death by fellow students after a dormitory debate was followed by accusations of blasphemy being spread across a university campus in the northern city of Maradan.

University officials had issued a public notification hours before the murder naming three students being investigated for "blasphemous activities". Blasphemy is an extremely sensitive topic in Muslim majority Pakistan, where penalties range from small fines to the death sentence, and dozens of people are on death row in the country's jails. There have been at least 65 recorded cases of vigilante murders since 1990, according to figures from a Center

for Research and Security Studies report and local media.

'Shocked and saddened'

In a statement released to the press on Saturday, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif said he was "shocked and saddened by the senseless display of mob justice that resulted in the murder of a young student, Mashal Khan, at Wali Khan University". Mardan police chief Alam Shinwari said 20 people had been identified as culpable in the killing on the basis of videos taken during the attack, and 15 had been arrested. He said they would be tried by anti-terrorism courts. Police say they are also investigating the clerics in Khan's hometown of Swabi, some 60 kilometers south of Mardan, for attempting to disrupt funeral proceedings and instigate hatred against the dead student's family.

"The two clerics ... the mosque loud-speaker for hate speech against the slain

student and his family and ... created hurdles for the people and another cleric to participate in the funeral," a senior Swabi police official told Reuters. He spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of being targeted by religious hardliners.

A local imam had refused to lead the funeral prayers at Khan's funeral on Friday, according to Swabi resident Salman Ahmed. A technician who was asked to do so in the cleric's place was confronted by several people afterwards. In his press release, the prime minister said the perpetrators of the attack would be brought to justice. "The nation should stand united to condemn this crime and to promote tolerance and rule of law in society," Sharif said. However, Pakistan's government has been vocal about blasphemy in recent months, with Sharif issuing an order in March for the removal of content deemed blasphemous online and threatening "strict punishment" for those violating the law. —Reuters

INDIAN METRO PROBES PORN SCREENED AT BUSY STATION

NEW DELHI: Hardcore pornography that flashed onto a giant screen at one of Delhi's busiest metro stations has prompted red-faced rail authorities to launch an investigation, an official said yesterday, after footage of the incident was shared widely online. Commuters were stopped in their tracks at the station in the Indian capital's central business district of Connaught Place last weekend when the x-rated footage began playing on a large screen that normally broadcasts advertisements for luxury property or credit card schemes.

Scores of people captured the moment on their mobile phones and the images have since gone viral on social media. Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) spokesman Mohinder Yadav told AFP Sunday that authorities were trying to identify three suspects believed to be behind the incident last Sunday.

DMRC said the offending screen was operated by a private company and had an unsecured WiFi network, leaving it accessible to others.

"As per CCTV footage, three men have run (the) porn clip through their mobile on this TV," the DMRC said in a statement late Saturday, adding that the contractor in charge of the screen would be required to have password protection from now on. The incident made headlines in a country where talk about sex or even public displays of affection are seen by many as taboo.

Mainstream cinema is stripped of raunchiness by India's socially-conservative censor board, which muted the word "lesbian" from a Hindi-language film, blocked the release of a toned-down version of the erotic movie "Fifty Shades of Grey" in 2015, and deemed two James Bond kissing scenes unsuitable for an Indian audience. —AFP