

## International

# North Korea fires suspected ballistic missile into sea

## Dialogue between Washington and Pyongyang remains stalled

SEOUL: North Korea fired what appeared to be a ballistic missile into the sea yesterday, South Korea and Japan said, in the first such launch by Pyongyang this year. In the decade since Kim Jong Un took power, North Korea has made rapid progress in its military technology at the cost of international sanctions. The nuclear-armed nation's first apparent weapons launch of 2022 follows a year of major arms tests despite the severe economic hardship during the coronavirus pandemic.

The South Korean military said the North fired what is "presumed to be a ballistic missile" towards the sea east of the peninsula at around 8:10 am (23:10 GMT Tuesday) from Jagang province, which borders China. After an emergency meeting, South Korea's national security council "expressed concerns over the launch", according to a statement by the president's office.

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida described it as a "possible ballistic missile launch". "It is truly regrettable that North Korea has continuously launched missiles since last year," he told reporters. Kishida said the Japanese government was analyzing details, including how many missiles may have been launched. "There have been no reports of damage to Japanese aircraft and vessels so far," Japan's top government spokesman Hirokazu Matsuno told reporters.

"We are continuing analysis, but if it took a normal orbit, it is expected to have travelled about 500 kilometers and fallen outside Japan's exclusive economic zone." The launch followed a speech by Kim last week in which he said North Korea would continue to build up its military capabilities.

"I expect North Korea to continue refining its arsenal as a way to improve its strategic position at

a time of political change in the region," Jean Lee, a senior fellow at the Washington-based Woodrow Wilson International Center, told AFP. In 2021, North Korea said it successfully tested a new type of submarine-launched ballistic missile, a long-range cruise missile, a train-launched weapon, and what it described as a hypersonic warhead.

### Stalled dialogue

The dialogue between Washington and Pyongyang remains stalled, following the collapse of talks between Kim and then-president Donald



### First apparent weapons launch of 2022

Trump in 2019. Under Trump's successor Joe Biden, the United States has repeatedly declared its willingness to meet North Korean representatives, while saying it will seek denuclearization. But Pyongyang has so far dismissed the offer, accusing Washington of pursuing "hostile" policies.

At the end of a key meeting of the ruling Workers' Party last week, Kim did not mention the United States at all. Instead of the policy positions on diplomacy for which Kim's New Year statements have been closely watched in recent years, he



SEOUL: People watch a television news broadcast showing file footage of a North Korean missile test at a railway station yesterday. — AFP

focused on food security and development in an extensive speech. But he said Pyongyang would continue to boost its capabilities, keeping in mind "the military environment of the Korean peninsula" and the changing international situation.

"Pyongyang is sending the message to the US that it will not change and therefore Washington must give in," Shin Beom-chul, a researcher at the Korea Research Institute for National Strategy, told AFP. North Korea is under multiple sets of international sanctions over its nuclear and ballistic missile

programs. The impoverished nation has also been under a rigid self-imposed coronavirus blockade that has hampered its economy.

The worsening economic situation during the pandemic, however, has not blunted those programs, and North Korea has continued to pursue weapons development, a UN report said in October. Concerns have grown about a full-blown food crisis in North Korea, and a United Nations human rights expert warned in October that the most vulnerable were "at risk of starvation". — AFP

## China tests 13m in Zhengzhou; Xi'an COVID outbreak eases

BEIJING: The city of Zhengzhou ordered its nearly 13 million residents to take COVID-19 tests yesterday after a handful of cases were detected, as China fights to stamp out virus clusters ahead of the Beijing Winter Olympics. Everyone in Zhengzhou, which has been placed under a partial lockdown, must be tested to "thoroughly uncover infections hidden among the public", the city's government said in a statement yesterday. The city has detected 11 cases in recent days.

The mass-testing order came as case numbers in the locked-down city of Xi'an fell to their lowest in weeks, with officials saying that outbreak had been "brought under control". Xi'an's 13 million residents have been under stay-at-home orders for the last fortnight. "Although the case number has been high for many days, the rapid rise in Covid spread at community level has been brought under control compared with the early stages of the outbreak," said Ma Guanghui, deputy director of Shaanxi province's health

commission, at a press conference. "The epidemic is showing a downward trend."

China has stuck to a rigid approach of stamping out COVID cases when they appear, with tight border restrictions and targeted lockdowns since the virus first emerged in the country in 2019. But, with less than a month to go until the Winter Olympics in the capital, a series of small outbreaks across the country has put the strategy under pressure. Although the number of reported cases in China is very low compared with other nations, infections in recent weeks have reached a high not seen in the country since March 2020.

China recorded 91 cases yesterday - including 35 in Xi'an, the city's lowest tally since mid-December. The Zhengzhou outbreak is tiny by comparison, but officials are taking no chances. State media said about 500 close contacts had been traced from the outbreak's two symptomatic cases, linked through mahjong rooms and family gatherings. Eight residential



ZHENGZHOU, China: Residents queue to receive COVID-19 tests as part of a mass testing program in this city in China's central Henan province yesterday. — AFP

communities were locked down.

On Monday, one million people in Yuzhou city - in the same province as Zhengzhou - were put under stay-at-home orders after three asymptomatic cases. Local authorities deemed to have failed in preventing virus outbreaks have been sacked or punished, including two senior Communist Party officials in Xi'an that were dismissed over their "insufficient rigour in preventing and controlling the outbreak".

Dozens of officials were punished for their handling of Xi'an's outbreak, including the official in charge of the city's health tracking system, who was suspended. Beijing will host the Winter Olympics from Feb 4, under some of the strictest rules for a mass sporting event since the pandemic started. All athletes, officials, staff and volunteers will be within a "closed loop" system that separates them from the public for the duration of the Games. — AFP

## Myanmar has 'ingredients for civil war': ASEAN

SINGAPORE: Myanmar has "all the ingredients for civil war", Cambodia, chair of Southeast Asia's regional bloc, has warned ahead of a visit by Prime Minister Hun Sen to the crisis-wracked country. Myanmar has been in chaos since a coup last year, with more than 1,400 people killed in a crackdown on dissent by security forces, according to a local monitoring group. Hun Sen, whose country this year holds the rotating chairmanship of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) bloc, will visit Myanmar on Friday and Saturday in an effort to defuse the crisis.

But Cambodian Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn warned the outlook was dire. "The political and security crisis in Myanmar is deepening, and has led to (an) economic, health and humanitarian crisis," he

said. "We feel that all the ingredients for civil war are now on the table. "There are now two governments, there are several armed forces, people are undergoing what they call the civil disobedience movement and (there is) guerrilla warfare around the country."

He was speaking at a lecture Monday organized by Singapore-based think-tank the ISEAS-Yusuf Ishak Institute. The event was held under the Chatham House Rule, which means the speaker must give permission before his comments are reported to facilitate candor. Cambodia's foreign ministry on Tuesday gave permission for AFP to report his comments.

Hun Sen, one of the world's longest-ruling strongmen, yesterday called for a ceasefire, saying "all relevant parties must stop violence". "Whether or not we reach a deal in negotiations, I ask for a ceasefire first because it has the benefits to flesh and blood - don't let people die or be injured," he said at a ceremony in Phnom Penh. In a joint statement, more than 250 anti-coup resistance groups in Myanmar condemned the visit and urged Hun Sen to cancel.

### Visit criticism

Prak Sokhonn rejected criticism that Hun Sen's visit would legitimize the junta, and said the kingdom's "immediate attention is on improving the situation in Myanmar". Efforts would remain focused on a peace roadmap and the "five-point consensus" agreed on by ASEAN leaders last year, he said. The visit aims "to pave the way for progress" by "creating a conducive environment for inclusive dialogue and political trust among all parties concerned".

Since the coup, there has been little sign of progress. A visit by an ASEAN special envoy to Myanmar has been delayed after the junta refused to allow him to meet with ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi. In response, the bloc excluded Myanmar's junta leader from a high-level October summit, a rare rebuke by a group often criticized for being toothless. Myanmar's crisis has bad implications for "regional stability... ASEAN's image, credibility, unity," Prak Sokhonn added. Nevertheless, he said Cambodia was making efforts to allow Myanmar's junta chief to resume attending meetings of the bloc again. — AFP

## Hong Kong tests 3,700 on 'nowhere cruise' ordered back to port

HONG KONG: A Hong Kong cruise ship carrying 3,700 people was ordered back to port yesterday for virus testing after nine people were found to be close contacts in an Omicron variant outbreak. Like mainland China, Hong Kong pursues a zero-Covid policy and maintains some of the world's strictest measures - including virtually closed borders, weeks-long quarantines, targeted lockdowns and mass testing.

The city has recorded 114 Omicron cases, with the vast majority identified at the airport or during the 21-day hotel quarantine that is mandatory for most arrivals. But a small community outbreak traced to Cathay Pacific airline staff has

sparked mass testing and contact tracing in recent days. Yesterday, those tracing efforts reached the "Spectrum of the Seas", one of the vessels offering cooped-up Hong Kongers a "cruise to nowhere" that sails into international waters for short trips.

Health authorities said nine people on the cruise, which left on Sunday, were classified as close contacts and ordered the ship back to port a day early. All on board - 2,500 passengers and 1,200 crew - must test negative before they can disembark. An AFP reporter outside the cruise terminal yesterday could see guests relaxing and exercising on their outdoor balconies.

"A lot of dining tables and seats in the theatre were sealed, and we have wristbands that can help track our movements on board," one passenger on board, who asked for anonymity, told AFP by phone. "When we booked the tour we knew there was a risk. It's just unlucky that it's us," she added.

Microbiologist Yuen Kwok-yung, one of Hong Kong's top COVID-19 experts, warned that an invisible infection link might have formed in the city. "The fifth wave is very likely to take place," Yuen told reporters on Tuesday. Hong Kong's strict health rules have kept the city largely free of the virus, with just over 12,000 cases and 213 deaths since the pandemic began. But it has also left a business hub that dubs itself "Asia's World City" cut off from the rest of the world, including mainland China. — AFP



HONG KONG: Cruise ship "Spectrum of the Seas" is docked at a terminal yesterday after it was ordered to return to the city. — AFP

### News in brief

#### 10 die in Zanzibar boat tragedy

DAR ES SALAAM: Ten people died when a boat ferrying people to a funeral in the Indian Ocean archipelago of Zanzibar capsized, police said yesterday. Another 15 people were rescued after the incident late Tuesday, and rescuers were still searching for others possibly missing. The accident happened after the vessel encountered a mechanical problem as it was transporting people from Chakechake on the island of Pemba to the Kisiwa Panza islet. — AFP

#### UK vows crackdown on threats

LONDON: Britain's justice secretary said yesterday he wanted to put the "fear of God" into those who threaten women and that restoring women's faith in the legal system was his "top priority" following a string of high-profile murders in London. Dominic Raab said he was "shocked and horrified" by the recent killings of several women, including one who was murdered by a serving police officer, calling the scale of violence "sickening". — AFP

#### Polish president COVID positive

WARSAW: Polish President Andrzej Duda has tested positive for COVID-19 and is self-isolating, his chief of staff Pawel Szrot said yesterday. "The president is fine, has no severe symptoms and is under constant medical care," Szrot said on Twitter. Szrot said the president had received three COVID vaccine doses in April, June and December of last year. Poland's health ministry yesterday reported a daily increase of 17,196 cases and 632 COVID-linked deaths. — AFP

#### Patients dying in Tigray

NAIROBI: Doctors in Ethiopia's war-hit Tigray region say patients are needlessly dying of treatable conditions because a de facto blockade is preventing medicines and other life-saving supplies from reaching stricken hospitals. A dire shortage of oxygen, intravenous fluids and other critical equipment had made surgery and essential procedures almost impossible over the past six months, according to doctors from Tigray's biggest hospital. — AFP