

International

North Korea fires missile after COVID cases prompt Kim to order lockdown

Kim Jong Un appears in a mask on TV for first time to order nationwide lockdowns

PYONGYANG: North Korea confirmed its first-ever COVID cases Thursday and declared a "serious emergency", with leader Kim Jong Un appearing in a mask on television for the first time to order nationwide lockdowns.

Hours after the shock announcement—the first time the nuclear-armed country has ever admitted to a case of COVID-19 — Seoul's military said it had detected three short-range ballistic missiles fired from near Pyongyang. The launch, one of more than a dozen sanctions-busting weapons tests so far this year, comes shortly after Washington warned that Kim's regime could test a nuke any day, with satellite images indicating fresh activity at nuclear sites.

Earlier Thursday, North Korea said it had moved into "maximum emergency epidemic prevention system" after patients sick with fever in Pyongyang tested positive for the "Omicron BA.2 variant" of COVID-19. Kim, wearing a mask on state television for the first time, oversaw an emergency politburo meeting to discuss the outbreak and "called on all the cities and counties of the whole country to thoroughly lock down their areas."

Kim told the meeting that the goal was to "quickly cure the infections in order to eradicate the source of the virus spread," KCNA said, without specifying how many COVID infections had been detected.

North Korea's crumbling health infrastructure would struggle to deal with a major outbreak, with its 25 million people not vaccinated, experts say. By following its admission of COVID cases with a missile test, North Korea is signalling "coronavirus control and its pursuit of national defense are two separate things," Yang Moo-jin, a professor at the University of North Korean Studies said.

"It is now reasonable to assume it could also con-



SEOUL: Visitors use binoculars to look towards the North Korean side of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) from the Odusan Unification Tower in Paju on May 12, 2022. — AFP

duct a nuclear test with Kim Jong Un's greenlight at any moment," he added.

No vaccines

"For Pyongyang to publicly admit Omicron cases, the public health situation must be serious," Leif-Eric Easley, a professor at Ewha University in Seoul said. "Pyongyang will likely double down on lockdowns, even though the failure of China's zero-COVID strategy suggests that approach won't work against the Omicron variant."

North Korea has turned down offers of vaccinations from the World Health Organization, China, and

Russia. Accepting vaccines through the WHO's Covax scheme "requires transparency over how vaccines are distributed," Go Myong-hyun, researcher at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies told AFP.

"That's why North Korea rejected it," Go said. North Korea is surrounded by countries that have battled-or are still fighting to control-significant Omicron-fueled outbreaks.

South Korea, which has high rates of vaccination, has recently eased almost all Covid-19 restrictions, with cases sharply down after a spike in March. Neighboring China, the world's only major economy to still maintain a zero-COVID policy, is battling multiple

Omicron outbreaks. Major Chinese cities, including the financial capital Shanghai, have been under strict lockdowns for weeks. China said Thursday it was "ready to provide full support and assistance to North Korea in its fight against the epidemic," foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said. It appears North Korea will try to avoid China's strict measures, which have seen millions of people locked into their apartments for several weeks, including in Beijing, said Cheong Seong-chang of the Sejong Institute.

But even less harsh measures would create a "severe food shortage and the same chaos China is now facing," he said. Seoul-based specialist site NK News reported that areas of Pyongyang had already been locked down for two days, with reports of panic-buying.

Nuke test?

South Korea's President Yoon Suk-yeol, who was sworn in Tuesday, has vowed to get tough with Pyongyang, after five years of failed diplomacy. After high-profile talks collapsed in 2019, North Korea has doubled-down on weapons testing, conducting a blitz of launches so far this year, including intercontinental ballistic missiles. Satellite imagery indicates North Korea is preparing to conduct a nuclear test, and the United States has warned this could come as soon as this month.

But the COVID-19 outbreak could potentially disrupt their military program, analysts said. "There is a possibility of delaying the nuclear test in order to focus on overcoming the coronavirus," Yang Moo-jin, a professor at the University of North Korean Studies, told AFP. But he said if public fears over an outbreak were to spread, Kim might go ahead with a test "to divert this fear to another place". — AFP

China defends Hong Kong cardinal's arrest

BEIJING: China on Thursday defended the arrest of a 90-year-old Catholic cardinal under Hong Kong's national security law, a move that triggered international outrage and deepened concerns over Beijing's crackdown on freedoms in the financial hub. Retired cardinal Joseph Zen, one of the most senior Catholic clerics in Asia, was among a group of veteran democracy advocates arrested Wednesday for "colluding with foreign forces".

Pop singer Denise Ho, veteran barrister Margaret Ng and prominent cultural studies scholar Hui Po-keung were also arrested, the latter as he attempted to fly to Europe to take up an academic post.

Cyd Ho, a democracy activist currently in jail over a previous protest conviction, was arrested on Thursday. "The persons concerned are suspected of conspiracy to collude with foreign countries or foreign forces to endanger national security—an act of severe nature," Beijing's foreign ministry office in Hong Kong said. Hong Kong's government said the religious background of those arrested was "completely irrelevant" and that "no one can enjoy a privilege above the law".

The five were detained for being trustees of a now-disbanded defense fund that helped pay legal and medical costs for those arrested during the huge and sometimes violent democracy protests three years ago. China responded with a broad campaign to crush the movement and transform the city so that it more closely resembles the authoritarian mainland.

Zen and his colleagues, who were released on bail late Wednesday, join more than 180 Hong Kongers arrested to date under the security law imposed to stop the protests.

'Deeply troubling'

Criticism came from Western nations who have accused China of eviscerating the freedoms it once promised Hong Kong. The United States, which has sanctioned key Chinese officials over the crackdown, called on Beijing to "cease targeting Hong Kong's advocates". British foreign office minister James Cleverly told parliament on Thursday the arrests were "unacceptable". Canadian foreign minister Melanie Joly called the arrests "deeply troubling".

Chinese COVID testing firm probed after reports of false results

BEIJING: A COVID-19 testing firm in Shanghai is being investigated by city officials after reports that residents were given false-positive results that landed them in harsh state quarantine.

The city has been under lockdown for weeks as China enforces a zero-COVID policy through shutdowns, mass testing and tight restrictions on movement—with everyone who tests positive being sent to a government isolation centre, even those without symptoms. Numerous Shanghai residents wrote on the Twitter-like Weibo platform this week that they received false-positive results from Zhongke Runda, which operates three testing centers in the financial hub of 25 million.

The group's parent company, Shanghai Runda Medical Technology, said in a stock filing Wednesday that reports about false positives have "casts doubt on the accuracy of Zhongke Runda's lab nucleic acid testing data" and an investigation is being held. The group's shares have slid since the reports first started on Monday.

Shanghai health authorities said they had declared an investigation into an unspecified "third-party testing organization" in response to online comments about test results.

One woman said her daughter got a positive result after a Runda test and was sent to a quarantine facility with bad conditions. "On May 7, my exam-prepping daughter who has barely left the house tested false positive," the Weibo user wrote.

Her whole family were "thrown into a scary-looking quarantine centre" where the lights were on 24 hours a day and there was no medical care, she said. Residents who test positive face extended stays in crowded facilities. In some cases, entire buildings are sent into quarantine if one resident tests positive.

Another resident, who initially received a false-positive test from Runda, said they later tested positive after spending four days in quarantine. As fears mount a lockdown may be imposed in the capital. Beijing officials on Monday said that they were investigating issues with an unspecified number of testing institutions, including inaccuracies.

At least 15 major cities across China now require residents to get COVID-19 tests every two to seven days, according to research firm Soochow Securities. Nomura economists estimate that regular mass testing could cost as much as 1.8 per cent of China's GDP. — AFP

Grandchild or \$650,000: Indian couple sues son

DEHRADUN, India: An Indian couple are taking their son to court demanding that he and his wife produce either a grandchild within a year or cough up almost \$650,000. Sanjeev and Sadhana Prasad say that they exhausted their savings raising and educating their pilot son and paying for a lavish wedding. Now they want payback.

"My son has been married for six years but they are still not planning a baby. At least if we have a grandchild to spend time with, our pain will become bearable," the couple said in their petition filed with a court in Haridwar last week. The compensation they are demanding — 50 million rupees—includes the cost of a wedding reception in a five-star hotel, a luxury car worth \$80,000 and paying for the couple's honeymoon abroad, the Times of India reported Thursday.

The parents also forked out \$65,000 to get their son trained as a pilot in the United States only for him to return to India unemployed, the paper said. "We



Sanjeev and Sadhana Prasad

also had to take a loan to build our house and now we are going through a lot of financial hardships. Mentally too we are quite disturbed because we are living alone," the couple said in their petition. The couple's lawyer Arvind Kumar said the petition will be taken up for hearing by the court in northern India on May 17.

India has a strong joint family system with many generations including grandparents, nephews, aunts and uncles often living in the same household. However, in recent years the trend has shifted, with young couples preferring to move away from their parents or siblings, and wives—such as in this case—opting to work rather than focus on having children and staying at home. — AFP

US, China congratulate Marcos for election win

MANILA: The United States and China have congratulated Ferdinand Marcos Jr on his win in the Philippine presidential election, as the superpowers jostle to have the strongest ties with the Southeast Asian nation. Marcos, the son and namesake of the late Philippine dictator, secured more than half of the votes in Monday's poll to win the presidency by a wide margin and cap a remarkable comeback for his family.

He and running mate Sara Duterte, who also won the vice presidential race in a landslide, have embraced key policies of outgoing President Rodrigo Duterte, including his position on China.

The elder Duterte sought to pivot away from the United States, the Philippines' former colonial master, towards China since taking power in 2016 — and appeared reluctant to confront Beijing over territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Even before Marcos declared victory, the US and Chinese presidents were quick off the mark to start building a personal relationship seen as strategically vital by both rivals.

In a phone call Wednesday, Chinese President Xi Jinping told Marcos the two countries had been "partners through thick and thin", Chinese state television reported Thursday.

"I attach great importance to the development of China-Philippines relations and am willing to establish

a good working relationship with President-elect Marcos, adhere to good neighbourliness and friendship," Xi said.

'Friend, ally, partner'

The United States said it will seek close security ties with the Philippines under Marcos, but made clear it would raise human rights. In a phone call, US President Joe Biden congratulated Marcos and said he wanted to expand cooperation on a range of issues, including climate change and "respect for human rights". Marcos said Thursday he had assured Biden that the Philippines "always held the United States in high regard as a friend, an ally, and a partner".

Marcos also invited Biden to his June 30 inauguration, but did not say if the US leader had accepted. The United States has a complex relationship with the Philippines—and the Marcos family.

After ruling the former US colony for two decades with the support of the United States, which saw him as a Cold War ally, Marcos senior went into exile in Hawaii in the face of mass protests and with the nudging of Washington in 1986.

As regional tensions remain high, Washington is keen to preserve its security alliance with Manila that includes a mutual defense treaty and permission for the US military to store defence equipment and supplies on several Philippine bases. But Marcos's spokesman Vic Rodriguez warned a US contempt of court judgement against the younger Marcos could "affect" the relationship.

The decades-old issue relates to the family's failure to pay compensation to thousands of victims of human rights abuses during Marcos senior's regime.—AFP



MANILA, Philippines: Presidential candidate Ferdinand Marcos Jr greets supporters as he arrives at the campaign headquarters in Manila. — AFP