

International

North Korea 'ready for nuclear test' with Biden due in Seoul

North Korea is preparing to conduct its seventh nuclear test this year

SEOUL: North Korea is poised to conduct a nuclear test, Seoul said Thursday, as the United States warned it could come as President Joe Biden visits South Korea this week. The visits to Seoul, followed by Tokyo, are being touted as proof that Washington is seeking to cement its years-long pivot to Asia, where rising Chinese commercial and military power is undercutting decades of US dominance.

However, Biden's first trip as president to the region looks set to be overshadowed by an increasingly belligerent North Korea. Despite a spiralling COVID outbreak, Pyongyang's "preparations for a nuclear test have been completed and they are only looking for the right time", South Korean lawmaker Ha Tae-keung said after being briefed by Seoul's spy agency.

Military adjustments

Biden, who will visit some of the nearly 30,000 US troops stationed in South Korea, is ready to make "adjustments" to the US military posture in the region, and Seoul's hawkish new President Yoon Suk-yeol is eager for stronger ties.

Both Biden and Yoon have said they're open for talks with Pyongyang but they expect to see real progress on denuclearisation-which analysts say is anathema to Kim and will stall talks. "Biden judges that the North Korean issue can't be resolved through impromptu meetings between the leaders as Trump did," said Woo Jung-yeop, a researcher at the Sejong Institute. North Korea will be watching the outcome of the Yoon-Biden meeting Saturday very closely, said Yang Moo-jin, a professor at the University of North Korean Studies. "Depending on the result, North Korea will decide on whether it will speed up or slow down its ICBM and nuclear tests," Yang said.

Sullivan said the security situation regarding North Korea was being "closely" coordinated with South Korea and Japan and that he had also spoken about the issue with his Chinese counterpart on Wednesday. It is likely that Kim is still debating what to do, in particular due to this US pressure on Beijing-Kim's sole major ally-to help rein in Pyongyang's nuclear and ICBM tests, the Sejong Institute's Cheong said.

Kim is also well aware of the gridlock at the UN Security Council after Russia's invasion of Ukraine-so it is "highly likely" a nuke or ICBM test will come during Biden's Asia tour, Cheong added. Moscow would likely block any attempt at the UN to impose further sanctions on Pyongyang over a weapons test.

Strategic neglect?

After Seoul, Biden heads to Japan on Sunday for talks with Tokyo's top leaders, before joining a Quad summit-a grouping of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States. Sullivan said Biden is bound for Asia with "the wind at our back" after successful US lead-



SEOUL: File picture shows people watching a television screen showing a news broadcast with file footage of a North Korean missile test, at a railway station in Seoul. — AFP

ership in the Western response to President Vladimir Putin's now almost three-month-long invasion of Ukraine. The high military, diplomatic and economic cost imposed on Russia is seen in Washington as a cautionary tale for China, given its stated ambitions to gain control over democratic-ruled Taiwan, even if that means going to war. But the fact he arrives in Asia under the shadow of a possible North Korean nuclear test is partly due to his "strategic neglect" of the region since he took office, said Park Won-gon, a professor at Ewha University.

Talks between Washington and Pyongyang have been stalled for years, after an extraordinary show of

diplomacy between then US president Donald Trump and Kim-brokered by Yoon's predecessor Moon Jae-in-ultimately ended in failure. Trump held three headline-grabbing meetings with Kim and claimed that the two were "in love", but analysts say little to no progress was made in dismantling the North's nuclear programmes. At a vast military parade in Pyongyang recently, Kim said he was strengthening his nuclear arsenal "at the fastest possible speed". "In terms of denuclearisation and US-North Korea ties, we have returned to a situation where it's difficult to find any progress," Park said. "There is no way to really stop North Korea now." — AFP



Want to attract global attention

US intelligence says there is a "genuine possibility" that North Korea's Kim Jong Un could stage this "provocation" after Biden arrives in Seoul late Friday, his administration said. This could mean "further missile tests, long-range missile tests or a nuclear test, or frankly both" around the time of Biden's trip, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said.

Satellite imagery indicates North Korea is preparing to conduct what would be its seventh nuclear test-which would cap a record-breaking blitz of launches this year, including intercontinental ballistic missiles.

"North Korea will want to attract global attention by conducting a nuclear test during President Biden's visit," Cheong Seong-chang of the Center for North Korea Studies at the Sejong Institute told AFP.

Nearly 60m people internally displaced worldwide in 2021

GENEVA: Conflicts and natural disasters forced tens of millions to flee within their own country last year, pushing the number of internally displaced people to a record high, monitors said Thursday.

Some 59.1 million people were registered as internally displaced worldwide in 2021 — an all-time record expected to be broken again this year amid mass displacement inside war-torn Ukraine.

Around 38 million new internal displacements were reported in 2021, with some people forced to flee multiple times during the year, according to a joint report by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC).

That marks the second-highest annual number of new internal displacements in a decade after 2020, which saw record-breaking movement due to a string of natural disasters. Last year, new internal displacements from conflict surged to 14.4 million-marking a 50-percent jump from 2020 and more than doubling since 2012, the report showed.

'World is falling apart'

And global internal displacement figures are only expected to grow this year, driven in particular by the war in Ukraine. More than eight million people have already been displaced within the war-ravaged country since Russia's full-scale invasion began on February 24, in addition to the more than six million who have fled Ukraine as refugees. "2022 is looking bleak," IDMC director Alexandra Bilak told reporters. The record numbers seen in 2021, she said, marked "a tragic indictment really on the state of the world and on peace-building efforts in particular". NRC chief Jan Egeland agreed, warning: "It has never been as bad as this."

"The world is falling apart," he told reporters. "The situation today is phenomenally worse than even our record figure suggests." In 2021, sub-Saharan Africa counted the most internal movements, with more than five million displacements reported in Ethiopia alone, as the country grappled with the raging and expanding Tigray conflict and a devastating drought. That marks the highest figure ever registered for a single country.

'Titanic shift' needed

Unprecedented displacement numbers were also recorded last year in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Afghanistan, where the Taliban's return to power, along with drought, saw many flee their homes. In Myanmar, where the military junta seized power in a February coup last year, displacement numbers also reached a record high, the report found.

The Middle East and North Africa region recorded its lowest number of new displacements in a decade, as the conflicts in Syria, Libya and Iraq de-escalated somewhat, but the overall number of displaced people in the region remained high.

Syria, where civil war has been raging for more than 11 years, still accounted for the world's highest number of people living in internal displacement due to conflict — 6.7 million-at the end of 2021.

That was followed by the DR Congo at 5.3 million, Colombia at 5.2 million, and Afghanistan and Yemen at 4.3 million. Despite the hike in conflict-related displacement, natural disasters continued to account for most new internal displacement, spurring 23.7 million such movements in 2021.

A full 94 percent of those were attributed to weather and climate-related disasters, like cyclones, monsoon rains, floods and droughts. Experts say that climate change is increasing the intensity and frequency of such extreme weather events.—AFP

Climate fight rages in rich Australia suburbs

SYDNEY: In a land struck by ferocious bushfires and floods, Australian voters frustrated by climate inaction are flocking to a band of right-leaning green-minded independents, threatening to flip a string of conservative strongholds from blue to "teal".

More than 20 candidates-highly qualified, well financed and mostly women—are barnstorming some of Australia's wealthiest suburbs ahead of Saturday's election, aiming to snatch parliamentary seats held by ruling conservatives for generations.

Polls indicate these "teal" independents-somewhere between conservative blue and environmental green on the political spectrum-could not just win seats, but hold the balance of power in a hung parliament. Among the districts up for grabs are those previously held by four conservative Liberal Party prime ministers and the district of current Treasurer Josh Frydenberg, who is seen as a possible future party leader and prime minister.

More than 17 million voters are registered for the May 21 polls, which will choose all 151 seats in the lower chamber and 40 of the 76 seats in the Senate. The independents are sticking a dagger into the conservatives' exposed flank on the climate and other major concerns such as corruption and the treatment of women in government. Australia's 2019-2020 "Black Summer" bushfires and subsequent east coast floods highlighted the deadly and catastrophic consequences of climate change. But Morrison's Liberal-National coalition backs coal mining and burning into the distant future, and has resisted calls to cut carbon emissions from 2005 levels

faster than its current commitment of up to 28 percent by 2030. The government has also failed to deliver a promised federal anti-corruption watchdog. Analysts say the climate is a national concern but is more likely to sway votes in leafy suburban seats where people feel no threat from a cut to mining jobs.

Some conservative voters feel they have been "left in the wilderness" by the Liberal Party's drift to the right, said Zoe Daniel, a former ABC journalist turned independent who is now a front-runner in the polls in the wealthy Melbourne seat of Goldstein.

'Powerful influences'

A YouGov poll published May 11 put Daniel slightly ahead of the incumbent Liberal Party member for Goldstein, Tim Wilson. The "umbrella issue" for voters is integrity, Daniel told AFP, not just the need for a federal anti-corruption watchdog but also transparency in spending taxpayers' money and political donations.

That spills over into other issues such as the climate, said Daniel, who supports a 60-percent cut in carbon emissions by 2030, far more than the government or opposition Labor Party. "I think the penny has started to drop for people that there are powerful influences in the background and that's why our climate policy looks the way it does," she said.

It is no secret that the Liberal Party has close links to the mining industry, said Paul Williams, associate professor at Griffith University. "And the mining industry is Australia's most powerful lobby group." Labor, which relies on support from unions including those representing mine workers, has proposed a 43-percent cut in carbon pollution by 2030.

Monique Ryan, another independent favouring climate action and clean politics, led treasurer Frydenberg in the Melbourne seat of Kooyong, the survey indicated. Once a safe Liberal Party seat, Kooyong is also the former constituency of Australia's longest-serving prime minister, the late Robert Menzies.—AFP



SYDNEY: Voters queue up outside a pre-polling station in Berala electorate of Sydney on May 19, 2022, as Australians go to the polls on May 21 to decide who will run the country for the next three years. — AFP

UN slams Taliban closure of human rights body

GENEVA: The United Nations on Thursday slammed the Taliban's closure of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), calling it a "deeply retrograde step". Since the Taliban seized

power last August the hardline Islamists have closed several bodies that protected the freedoms of Afghans, including the electoral commission and the ministry for women's affairs.

UN human rights chief Michelle Bachelet said she was "dismayed" at the dissolution announced Tuesday. "The AIHRC performed extraordinary work in extremely difficult conditions over many years, shining a spotlight on the human rights of all Afghans, including victims on all sides of the conflict," she said in a statement.

"It has however, been unable to operate on the ground since August. "The AIHRC has been a powerful

News in brief

Kidnappers arrested

LAGOS: Nigerian police said they arrested two suspects behind the kidnapping of students from a Nigerian college last year, one of the most high-profile cases in a recent string of abductions of pupils. Gunmen killed a member of staff as they stormed Greenfield University in northwestern state of Kaduna on April 20, 2021, before seizing around 20 students. Five of the hostages were killed a few days later to force families and the government to pay a ransom. Fourteen were released after 40 days in captivity. The Nigerian police said late Wednesday they had detained two suspects-Aminu Lawal, also known as Kano, and Murtala Dawu, otherwise known as Mugala-who were implicated in several abduction cases. — AFP

Ship attacked off Yemen

LONDON: A British maritime security agency on Thursday said it was investigating reports of an attack on a vessel off Yemen's lawless coast. UK Maritime Trade Operations said the reported attack happened 34 nautical miles southwest of the Red Sea port of Hodeida, held by Huthi rebels. "Investigations are ongoing," it added. The UKMITO is involved in anti-piracy operations and is part of the Royal Navy, which is coordinating surveillance in the region. Previous attacks have been blamed on Somali pirates but have fallen in recent years as a result of international security operations.—AFP

Five migrants found dead

MEXICO CITY: The bodies of five migrants suspected to have died of dehydration and heat stroke were found in a railroad car in northern Mexico near the US border, authorities said Wednesday. The victims were three Hondurans, a Mexican and another unidentified person, Mexico's National Institute of Migration (INM) said. They appeared to have taken the train, which came from the United States and was headed to central Mexico, in the wrong direction, authorities in Coahuila state said. Railway security personnel found the bodies after seeing a foot sticking out of a moving railroad car near the city of Piedras Negras, according to the INM. The probable causes of death include "severe dehydration exacerbated by heat stroke," it said. Many thousands of US-bound undocumented migrants, most of them Central Americans, enter Mexico each year fleeing poverty and violence. — AFP

voice for human rights and a trusted partner of UN Human Rights, and its loss will be a deeply retrograde step for all Afghans and Afghan civil society."

The work of the commission, which included documenting civilian casualties of Afghanistan's two-decade war, was halted when the Taliban ousted a US-backed government last year and the body's top officials fled the country.

Bachelet said that during her visit to Kabul in March, she discussed with the de facto authorities the importance of re-establishing an independent human rights mechanism that can receive public complaints and bring concerns to the authorities. — AFP