

International

N Korea fires ballistic missiles in warning over US, S Korea drills

Seoul, Washington moving to bolster security cooperation in the region

SEOUL: North Korea fired two ballistic missiles Monday, its second weapons test in 48 hours, which Pyongyang said was a drill for a rocket launcher capable of a "tactical nuclear attack" that could take out entire enemy air bases.

Pyongyang had already tested one of its most powerful intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) on Saturday and warned more was to come, with leader Kim Jong Un's powerful sister calling the Pacific the North's "firing range".

Seoul and Washington, who are moving to bolster security cooperation in the region to address Pyongyang's growing threats, staged joint air drills after the ICBM launch—further enraging the North, which views such exercises as rehearsals for invasion.

State media outlet KCNA said Monday's missile drill involving "super-large multiple rocket launchers, the tactical nuclear attack means", showed the North's army could deter and counter any US-South Korean exercises, adding the weapons could "reduce to ashes the enemy's operational airfield".

Kim's sister, Kim Yo Jong, said Pyongyang was closely monitoring Washington and Seoul's moves to deploy more US strategic assets to the region, vowing "corresponding counteraction" if needed.

"The frequency of using the Pacific as our firing range depends upon the US forces' action character," she said in a statement published by KCNA.

Relations between the two Koreas are at one of their lowest points in decades, after the North last year declared itself an "irreversible" nuclear power and Kim Jong Un called for an "exponential" increase in weapons production, including tactical nukes.

South Korea's military, which said it had detected the launch of two short-range ballistic missiles early Monday, called the string of weapons tests by Pyongyang "a seri-

ous provocation that undermines peace and stability on the Korean peninsula".

And Seoul's foreign ministry rapidly imposed fresh sanctions on four individuals and five entities linked to North Korea's weapons programmes Monday. "Our government has made it clear that North Korea's provocations will inevitably come at a price," it said in a statement. The UN Security Council will hold a meeting to discuss the situation on Tuesday.

'Surprise' drill

Pyongyang said its Saturday ICBM launch was a "surprise" drill that demonstrated North Korea's capacity to carry out a "fatal nuclear counterattack". Such claims intend to demonstrate, in the face of international scepticism, "not only the development of strategic and tactical nuclear forces but also the operational capability to use them", said Leif-Eric Easley, a professor at Ewha University in Seoul.

North Korea gave its soldiers an "excellent mark" for carrying out the "sudden launching drill" on Saturday, but South Korean analysts pointed out that the estimated nine hours between the order and the launch was not particularly rapid.

Kim Yo Jong dismissed such criticism on Monday as "a bid to undervalue the preparedness of the DPRK missile forces", she said, using North Korea's official name. Hong Min of the Korea Institute for National Unification told AFP that the strong reaction was part of a pattern of North Korea pushing back against any external analysis of its ICBM capabilities.

The angry retort "shows the North really cares about delivering a message that it is capable of hitting the US mainland", he said. The North Korea weapons launches came ahead of a joint US-South Korean tabletop exercise



TOKYO: Pedestrians walk past a screen in Tokyo on February 20, 2023, displaying North Korea's missile launch footage broadcasted by Korean Central Television on Feb 19, 2023. —AFP

this week aimed at improving their response in the event of a nuclear attack by Pyongyang. And North Korea warned last week of an "unprecedentedly" strong response to ramped-up drills by Seoul and Washington. Go Myong-

hyun, a researcher at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, said the tests and rhetoric were all "strategic signalling that North Korea wants to send to the United States that North Korea is now a nuclear and missile power". —AFP

Taliban shut key border crossing with Pakistan

JALALABAD: Gunfire erupted between Afghanistan and Pakistan border forces on Monday after Taliban authorities shut the country's busiest crossing with its eastern neighbour, officials said. Relations between the countries have been testy since the Taliban took Kabul in August 2021, with Islamabad accusing its neighbour of harbouring armed groups that have carried out strikes on its soil.

There have been frequent flare-ups along the mostly mountainous border splitting the countries—which no Afghan government has ever recognised—including sporadic gunfights and crossing closures. A Pakistani official told AFP the Torkham crossing, equidistant between Kabul and Islamabad, was shut late Sunday after Pakistani officials turned away a traveller accompanying a medical patient.

On Monday at 7:30 am Afghan time (0300 GMT) a "clash took place when Pakistani forces fired at Afghan forces", Afghan official Harfat Mubajir told AFP. "Afghan forces shot in

response, but nobody was hurt," he added. Mohammad Sediq Khalid, the commissioner for Torkham on the Afghan side, said "the gate has been closed by the order of Kabul officials after complaints that Pakistan is not fulfilling its promises". A Pakistan border security source told AFP the dispute over the traveller refused entry stemmed from a new requirement for attendants of medical patients to carry certain documentation.

The government did not respond to a request from AFP to clarify the new rules. The border crossing at Torkham — 177 kilometres (110 miles) from the capital of each country—is a key trading waypoint, where Afghanistan exports truckloads of coal and receives food and other supplies from Pakistan.

Both nations are in dire economic crisis, with Afghanistan reeling from a drop-off in aid following the end of the US-backed occupation, and Pakistan crippled by a domestic downturn and foreign exchange crisis that has left it on the brink of default.

In the year-and-a-half of Taliban rule, Pakistan has witnessed a dramatic uptick in attacks on its soil, mainly in the regions bordering Afghanistan. In January, a suicide bomber killed more than 80 police officers at a mosque in the northwestern provincial capital of Peshawar.

On Friday, a suicide bomber squad



TORKHAM: Taliban security personnel stand guard along a road after gunfire erupted between Afghanistan and Pakistan border forces near the Torkham border crossing between Afghanistan and Pakistan, in Nangarhar province on Feb 20, 2023. —AFP

stormed a police headquarters in the southern port city of Karachi, killing five. Both attacks were linked to the Pakistani Taliban, which has deep ties with the Afghan Taliban.

"I think that the Afghan state has to deliver on terrorism," Pakistan Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari told the Munich Security Conference on Saturday. "There's a whole alphabet soup of terrorist organisations that

have and still do base themselves out of Afghanistan."

Late on Sunday, Kabul's foreign ministry spokesman Abdul Qahar Balkhi said Zardari's "remarks asserting that terrorist groups operate from Afghanistan ... are untrue". "We advise Pakistan to discuss bilateral issues face-to-face with the Afghan government instead of complaining at international conferences," he said in a statement. —AFP

Bangladesh shuts down main oppn newspaper

DHAKA: The only newspaper of Bangladesh's main opposition party halted printing on Monday after a government suspension order was upheld, stoking fears about media freedom in the South Asian nation.

Campaigners and foreign governments including the United States have long expressed worries about efforts by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to silence criticism and what they see as creeping authoritarianism. The Dainik Dinkal, a broadsheet Bengali-language newspaper, has been a vital voice of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) for more than three decades. It employs hundreds of journalists and press workers.

It covers news stories that the mainstream newspa-

pers, most of which are controlled by pro-government businessmen, rarely do. This includes the frequent arrests of BNP activists and what the party says are thousands of fake cases against its supporters.

The newspaper said the Dhaka district authorities ordered the shutdown on December 26, but it continued to publish after making an appeal at the Press Council headed by a top high court judge. "The council rejected our appeal yesterday (Sunday), upholding the district magistrate's order to stop our publication," Shamsur Rahman Shimul Biswas, managing editor of the newspaper, told AFP.

The order, a copy of which was obtained by AFP, said the printing permit of the newspaper was cancelled after the newspaper violated the country's printing and publication laws. The council said the paper's publisher, Tarique Rahman—the acting chief of BNP—was a convicted criminal and was living abroad without handing over his job to another person.

Biswas said Rahman, now based in London, submit-

ted his resignation and appointed a new publisher, but the authorities did not accept the changes. "This shutdown is all part of the government crackdown on dissenting voices and freedom of speech," Biswas said.

The government on Monday did not comment on the shutdown. Two Dhaka-based journalist unions said in a joint statement that the decision was a "reflection of the repression of opposition voices". Unions and journalists staged small street protests over the shutdown on Monday.

Last month, Hasina's government ordered the closure of 191 websites it accuses of publishing "anti-state news", citing intelligence reports. The Bangladesh government has previously blocked websites several times, notably in December 2018 ahead of national elections.

The 2022 World Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters Without Borders ranked Bangladesh at 162, worse than Russia (155) and Afghanistan (156). Bangladesh's draconian Digital Security Act, under which hundreds of people have been arrested since 2018, has caused particular alarm. —AFP

Cyclone recovery expected to cost NZealand billions

WELLINGTON: New Zealand said Monday it was likely to cost billions of dollars to recover from Cyclone Gabrielle as the national state of emergency was extended by another week. Prime Minister Chris Hipkins confirmed 11 people have so far died in the wake of the devastating flash flooding and high winds which lashed the North Island last week.

"Our thoughts remain with families and communities grieving loved ones during such a difficult time," he added. Hipkins has warned the final death toll could rise, but the number of people who police were still looking to contact had fallen to about 2,300. The full extent of the cyclone's destruction is becoming clearer, as highways, power and telecommunications are re-established. The raging torrent of floodwater the cyclone unleashed swept away or badly damaged homes, businesses, bridges and roads

across New Zealand. Finance Minister Grant Robertson on Monday pledged NZ\$300 million (\$187 million) of relief.

Robertson warned the money pledged so far will only "scratch the surface" of the final figure needed, which he predicts will cost taxpayers "billions of dollars." "We have a long job ahead of us to rebuild after this disaster," warned Robertson who Hipkins has also made cyclone recovery minister, "but we have the resources and the will to do it."

According to Hipkins, 15,000 North Island households remain without power, mostly in the east coast cities of Gisborne and Napier, where floodwaters poured into many homes. After spending the weekend visiting hard-hit communities, Hipkins said the national state of emergency declared last week has been extended by another seven days.

"While some areas are starting to work on recovery, others are still very much in the emergency response phase," he added. This is only the third time in New Zealand's 183-year history that a national state of emergency has been declared. The other two were the 2019 Christchurch attacks and the Covid-19 pandemic. —AFP



NAPIER: Photo shows people standing next to debris in a flood-affected area in the aftermath of Cyclone Gabrielle near Napier. —AFP

News in brief

Iran bans reformist paper

TEHRAN: Iranian authorities on Monday banned reformist daily Sazandegi for publishing so-called "false content", state media reported, after the paper recently criticised the country's economic policies and morality police. The ban comes after a wave of protests broke out in mid-September over the death in custody of 22-year-old Iranian-Kurd Mahsa Amini following her arrest by morality police over an alleged breach of the strict dress code for women. "In its meeting today, the Press Supervisory Board banned Sazandegi newspaper," state news agency IRNA reported, saying investigations had found that the daily had committed "violations" including publishing "false content" and "disturbing public opinion". First published in February 2018, the paper was founded by the reformist Executives of Construction Party and was reported to have a daily circulation of about 8,000 copies. The daily had recently published articles criticising the government's economic policies, as well as the country's morality police. —AFP

Mother of dissident released

ALGIERS: The mother of prominent French-Algerian activist Amira Bouraoui has been released from custody but remains under court supervision, a rights group said Monday, a week after her arrest. Bouraoui had been banned from leaving Algeria after being sentenced to two years in jail for "offending Islam" and for insulting the president. Earlier this month she had been arrested in Tunisia and faced deportation to Algeria, but was able to leave for France, sparking a diplomatic incident between Algiers and its former colonial ruler. Algeria has accused France of assisting her "clandestine and illegal exfiltration" via Tunisia, and recalled its ambassador in Paris for consultations. Algerian authorities arrested the 46-year-old doctor's mother Khadidja Bouraoui. The CNLD prisoners' rights group said Monday the 71-year-old had been released under judicial supervision. —AFP

Eight soldiers killed in Burkina

OUGADOUGOU: Eight soldiers have died in an ambush by suspected jihadists in northern Burkina Faso, the army said on Monday, adding that "around 60" assailants had been killed in a counter-attack. The attack took place on Friday in Deou and Oursi in Oudalan province, it said in a statement. Eight soldiers were killed, three were wounded and several are missing, it said, giving a provisional toll. "Around 60 terrorists were killed in an airborne counterattack targeting enemy columns that were trying to escape toward the border in the north" toward Mali, it said. "Seven armed vehicles and dozens of motorbikes were also destroyed." The statement urged against publicising unofficial tolls until casualties were confirmed on the ground. Burkina Faso is battling a jihadist insurgency that spread from neighbouring Mali in 2015. The violence has led to more than 10,000 deaths, according to estimates by NGOs, and displaced some two million people. —AFP