

International

US to urge pressure against North Korea at Asian talks

Concern that UN sanctions on North are being relaxed

SINGAPORE: The US will urge the international community to keep up sanctions pressure against North Korea at a security forum in Singapore this week, as concerns mount that Pyongyang has made little progress towards denuclearization. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and his North Korean counterpart will attend the gathering in the city-state where US President Donald Trump and the North's leader Kim Jong Un held their historic summit two months ago.

Pompeo and top diplomats from other countries involved in trying to curtail Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions will scrutinize whether the North has taken concrete steps towards abandoning its nuclear weapons. At his landmark talks with Trump in June, Kim signed up to a vague commitment to "denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula" — a far cry from long-standing US demands for complete, verifiable and irreversible disarmament.

While there have been small signs of progress, news reports indicate Pyongyang is continuing to build rockets, and there are mounting concerns that the enforcement of United Nations sanctions on the North is being relaxed by some member states. A US official said Washington was "concerned" by North Korean violations of UN-approved sanctions, including illegal shipments of oil by sea. Gatherings like Saturday's ASEAN Regional Forum are "an opportunity to remind all coun-

tries of their obligations in adherence" of UN Security Council resolutions, the official said.

'Lasting peace, stability'

The annual forum, hosted by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), brings together top diplomats from 26 countries and the European Union for talks on political and security issues in Asia-Pacific. The foreign ministers from all nations involved in stalled "six-party" negotiations with North Korea aimed at reining in Pyongyang's nuclear program will be at the gathering: the US, China, Russia, Japan and South Korea.

Cutting off oil and fuel to the North would require enforcement primarily by China, which supplies most of North Korea's energy needs, but also by Russia, which delivers some oil to Pyongyang. Despite the concerns about the North's progress toward abandoning its nuclear weapons, ministers at the forum are expected to strike an upbeat note about the agreement between Trump and Kim.

They will encourage the US and Pyongyang "to continue working towards the realization of lasting peace and stability on a denuclearized Korean Peninsula", according to a draft copy of the chairman's statement obtained by AFP. US officials have not said if Pompeo will meet his North Korean counterpart, Ri Yong Ho, on the sidelines of the forum. But even if he does, Sung-Yoon Lee, a Korea expert at the Fletcher School

of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, was skeptical that there would be any fresh signs of progress when it came to denuclearization. "Pompeo shall gain nothing substantive other than North Korea's amenability to further talks about talks," he said.

'Free and open'

The US secretary of state will also focus on another major regional flashpoint at the forum — rival claims in the South China Sea and China's growing presence there. China claims nearly all the strategically vital sea, including waters approaching the coasts of ASEAN members Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei. Beijing has in recent years expanded its presence in the sea by building artificial islands capable of holding military bases.

Ahead of his trip to Southeast Asia, which will also take him to Malaysia and Indonesia, Pompeo called for a "free and open" Indo-Pacific region and will expand on the theme at the Singapore meeting, according to the State Department. The disputed waters will be in focus when the 10 ASEAN foreign ministers hold talks among themselves during a working dinner on Wednesday, with the regional bloc and China expected to announce some progress in long-running talks aimed at coming up with a code of conduct for the sea. They are expected to announce that they have agreed on a single draft text that reflects the starting negotiating positions of countries



SINGAPORE: In this file photo taken on June 12, 2018 US President Donald Trump (R) and North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un shake hands following a signing ceremony during their historic US-North Korea summit, at the Capella Hotel on Sentosa Island. — AFP

towards a code. Analysts however stressed it would be another small step coming over 15 years after negotiations began. Hoang Thi Ha, an analyst at the ASEAN Studies Centre in Singapore, said

the development represented "some initial progress" but noted that drawing up the code "will continue to be a painstaking and painfully slow process". — AFP

N Korea remains likely to be American: US agency

OSAN: The remains of foreign soldiers returned by North Korea last week are likely to be American, an official at the US agency that deals with troops missing in action said yesterday, as a US military aircraft prepared to repatriate the cases to Hawaii. Last week Pyongyang returned 55 cases of remains from the 1950-53 Korean War, in line with an agreement between US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un at their summit in Singapore in June.

The process of identification could take years, according to experts. But John Byrd, director of scientific analysis at the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA), said preliminary findings suggested that "they are likely to be American remains". "The remains are consistent with remains we have recovered in North Korea... in the past," Byrd told reporters at the Osan US Air Base in South Korea. The cases have been kept there since Friday, awaiting their repatriation to Hawaii for further forensic analysis. "There's no reason at this point to doubt that they do relate to Korean War losses," he added.

Around 500 officials from the United Nations Command (UNC), the United States and South Korea attended a formal repatriation ceremony at the airbase yesterday. The cases, each draped with a white and blue UN flag, were lined up in rows as the ceremony got under way. "The Korean War fallen have never been forgotten by the United States of America," the UNC said in a statement. "UNC never leaves troops behind, living or deceased, and will continue the mission of repatriation



US General Vincent Brooks, commander of the United Nations Command, US Forces Korea and Combined Forces Command, speaks during a repatriation ceremony for the remains of US soldiers who were killed in the Korean War and collected in North Korea, at Osan Air Base in Pyeongtaek. — AFP

until every service member returns home," it added. After the ceremony uniformed soldiers carefully deposited each case into a C-17 cargo plane. Byrd told reporters that "there was a single dog tag (US soldier's identity tag) provided with the remains." "The family of that individual has been notified," he said. "But I would caution... that it's not necessarily the case that the dog tag goes with the remains... in the box," he added, underscoring the challenges of identifying the recovered remains. The returned material also included military hardware and uniforms, including helmets, water bottles and boots, he said.

DNA, bones, dental records

Former DPAA official Jeong Yang-seung, who previously worked on identifying US remains from the North, said it was unusual to locate dog tags during the search and recovery process. "It's once in a blue moon that dog tags are recovered," Jeong, now professor of forensic anthropology at the Middle

Tennessee State University, told AFP. "I don't think North Korea is refusing to give dog tags when it has more but it probably doesn't have dog tags lying around," he said. "So when... only one dog tag was provided, it's probably not to tease the US but rather that it was sent because it could offer clues to the remains."

DNA analysis, skeletal studies of bones, dental records as well as details of where the remains were found play a key role in such investigations, he said. "It's a very thorough process with many, many procedures so it takes a long time," he said. "If it's identified quickly, it would be around five to six months, but if not, it could take decades." More than 35,000 Americans were killed on the Korean Peninsula during the war and around 7,700 of them are still considered missing, including 5,300 in North Korea alone. Between 1990 and 2005 229 sets of remains from the North were repatriated, but those operations were suspended when ties worsened over Pyongyang's banned nuclear weapons program. — AFP

IS fighters surrender in Afghanistan's north

MAZAR-I-SHARIF: More than 150 Islamic State fighters surrendered in Afghanistan yesterday, Afghan officials said, a move which they and the Taliban hailed as the end of the extremist group in the northern part of the country. The apparent IS capitulation comes after weeks of intense fighting with the Taliban in Jowzjan province in the north, and ongoing pressure from Afghan and US forces. "Their fighters have surrendered in the past, but this time it is more important because the Daesh leader and deputy surrendered with more than 150 fighters all at once," Mohammad Hanif Rezaee, spokesman for the 209 army corps in the north, told AFP.

Rezaee said 30 women and children had also handed themselves in to Afghan authorities. "With this the Daesh chapter is going to be closed in the north," he added, using the Arabic acronym for IS. IS has a relatively small but potent presence in Afghanistan, mainly in the eastern province of Nangarhar, but more recently in Jowzjan. The group has fought turf wars with the much larger Taliban since emerging in Afghanistan in 2014. Estimates on their numbers in the country run as high as around 2,000.

Until a few weeks ago there had been around 500 IS fighters in Darzab and Qush Tepa districts of Jowzjan, provincial governor Lutfulah Azizi has said. But the Taliban stepped up fighting with the group there after an IS attack on their fighters last month killed at least 15 people,

Azizi said. The Taliban took credit for the surrender announced by Afghan officials on Wednesday, saying it had "cleared" the north of IS fighters. It claimed it had captured 130, wounded more than 100, and killed 153.

The development comes as the Afghan army took over security in the eastern city of Jalalabad in IS's main stronghold of Nangarhar province after a spate of attacks, mostly claimed by the group. More checkpoints have also been set up and special forces are conducting operations after militants stormed a government office in the city on Tuesday, killing 15 people. No group has yet claimed responsibility for the attack, but IS is widely suspected of carrying it out. "To provide better security for the people, the national army is leading the security in the city," Attaullah Khogyani, spokesman for the governor of Nangarhar province, told AFP. "Police and other security forces are supporting them."

Under the new security plan, the army would lead efforts "to contain the emergency situation" for a week, Khogyani said, declining to provide details. Eventually, police and soldiers "will join hands to secure the city", he added. "IS has come under intense pressure from the government and the Taliban. They have lost a lot of men," former general Hadi Khalid, now a military analyst, told AFP. "The only strategy that can keep them going is to attack soft targets and that is what they have been doing recently." — AFP

Indian police probe use of growth hormones on children in brothels

CHENNAI: Indian police are investigating the use of growth hormones in a sex trafficking case, following the arrest of eight people charged with exploitation of children in brothels in Telangana state. Eleven girls, including four below age 7, were rescued from brothels in the temple town of Yadagirigutta where they were being groomed to become sex workers, a senior police officer said yesterday.

"The traffickers have confessed to us that they were giving hormone injections to the girls," said Mahesh Bhagwat, an officer in the state capital of Hyderabad, about 70 km from Yadagirigutta. "It is a clear case where we see that the girls were being groomed and injected with drugs to look older than their actual age," he said by phone. "We are also looking for the doctor supplying drugs to the traffickers."

Of the estimated 20 million girls and women working in India's sex industry, 16 million are

victims of trafficking, according to non-governmental organizations. A 2017 report by the West Bengal government highlighted the brutal "breaking in" of girls trafficked into brothels, a process that often includes rapes, beatings and starvation. The use of growth hormones, as well as drugs to sedate girls while they are being trafficked from one place to another, is rampant but rarely investigated, according to campaigners. "In most rescues, we come across young girls who have been pumped with drugs to look older," said Rishi Kant, of the anti-trafficking charity Shakti Vahini. "The police just mention it in their report and don't bother to investigate this aspect further," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. The eight traffickers arrested in Monday's raids had paid families up to 200,000 Indian rupees (\$2,917) for each girl, according to a police statement. In other cases, they targeted young orphans. — Reuters

US indicts woman at heart of Philippine graft scandal

MANILA: A businesswoman at the centre of a massive Manila corruption scandal has been charged in the US with laundering about \$20 million allegedly pilfered from the Philippine state, prosecutors said, adding they would seek her extradition. A federal grand jury in California indicted Tuesday Philippine national Janet Lim Napoles, a key suspect in the so-called "pork barrel" scandal where politicians allegedly embezzled roughly \$200 million that was supposed to help poor Filipinos.

Napoles, along with five family members, is accused of wiring \$20 million of the stolen money from the Philippines to California bank accounts, the US attorney's office said in a state-

ment. Lim, 54, is already behind bars in the Philippines, where she is on trial over graft charges stemming from the alleged embezzlement. The Manila law firm representing her declined to comment. The US indictment alleges the defendants used the money to buy real estate, shares in businesses, two Porsche Boxsters and finance the living expenses of three US-based Napoles family members.

"We will work with our Philippine counterparts to secure the extradition of the defendants to the United States," said US Attorney Nick Hanna. The US government won a court order in 2015 to freeze \$12.5 million worth of assets bought by Napoles and others using the allegedly stolen funds. "If the court orders the assets forfeited, the United States will work... to return the stolen funds back to the Philippine government," the statement said. The money was intended for use in development projects chosen by lawmakers, but instead it was diverted to phoney non-profit organizations and stolen. The scandal rocked the Philippines, where one in five people live on the equivalent of just over a dollar a day. Three Filipino senators were among those arrested in Manila in 2014 over the scam. — AFP

One-party rule 'terrible setback' for Cambodia: Opposition chief

BONNIEUX: The co-founder of Cambodia's disbanded opposition has decried the landslide victory of Hun Sen's ruling party in an uncontested poll as a "terrible setback", urging a campaign of non-cooperation with the next government. A provisional count from Sunday's poll has handed the Cambodia People's Party of strongman Hun Sen, who has ruled for more than three decades, all 125 parliamentary seats — cementing the country's status as a one-party state.

The election was held without the only credible opposition, the Cambodia National Rescue Party, which was barred from running after it was dissolved by the Supreme Court late last year. "It's a fake victory... a fake election, with a foregone conclusion," said CNRP co-founder Sam Rainsy, who lives in self-exile in Paris to avoid a slew of convictions he contends are politically motivated. "It is a return to the old system, the one-party system, like during the Cold War, during the Communist times... it is a terrible setback for Cambodia," he told AFP in an interview given in France's southern Provence region.

Hun Sen has hailed Sunday's vote as "free, fair and just", with his party saying the estimated 82 percent turnout made a mockery of CNRP calls for a boycott. Yesterday, his first public appearance since the electoral endorsement, Cambodia's ruler since 1985 said he is eyeing "big success" this year in



PHNOM PENH: Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen (C) poses for photos with people as he attends the official launch of a public shuttle boat. — AFP

"building the economy... and democracy". But critics say the poll was held against a backdrop of local-level intimidation while dissenting voices in the media and civil society had been quieted in the run-up to the vote.

In the last elections in 2013 the CNRP took around 44 percent of the popular vote — threatening Hun Sen's hold on power. The CNRP's leadership has since either been jailed, pressed into leaving the country or silenced by court cases and intimidation. Rainsy urged his party's supporters to "mobilise to protest against this fake election" in a campaign of non-cooperation against any government that emerges from

the landslide win. He also said the international community should "reject" the result.

Cambodia and Hun Sen lent heavily on the Western world for aid and investment to rebuild the country from the ruins of decades of civil war, rule by the brutal Khmer Rouge and occupation by Vietnam. But under fire from his old allies for his increasingly authoritarian bent, Hun Sen has in recent years turned to China for no-strings soft loans, investment and diplomatic ballast. Washington and the European Union have condemned Sunday's uncontested poll, while Beijing offered its congratulations to the Cambodian people. — AFP