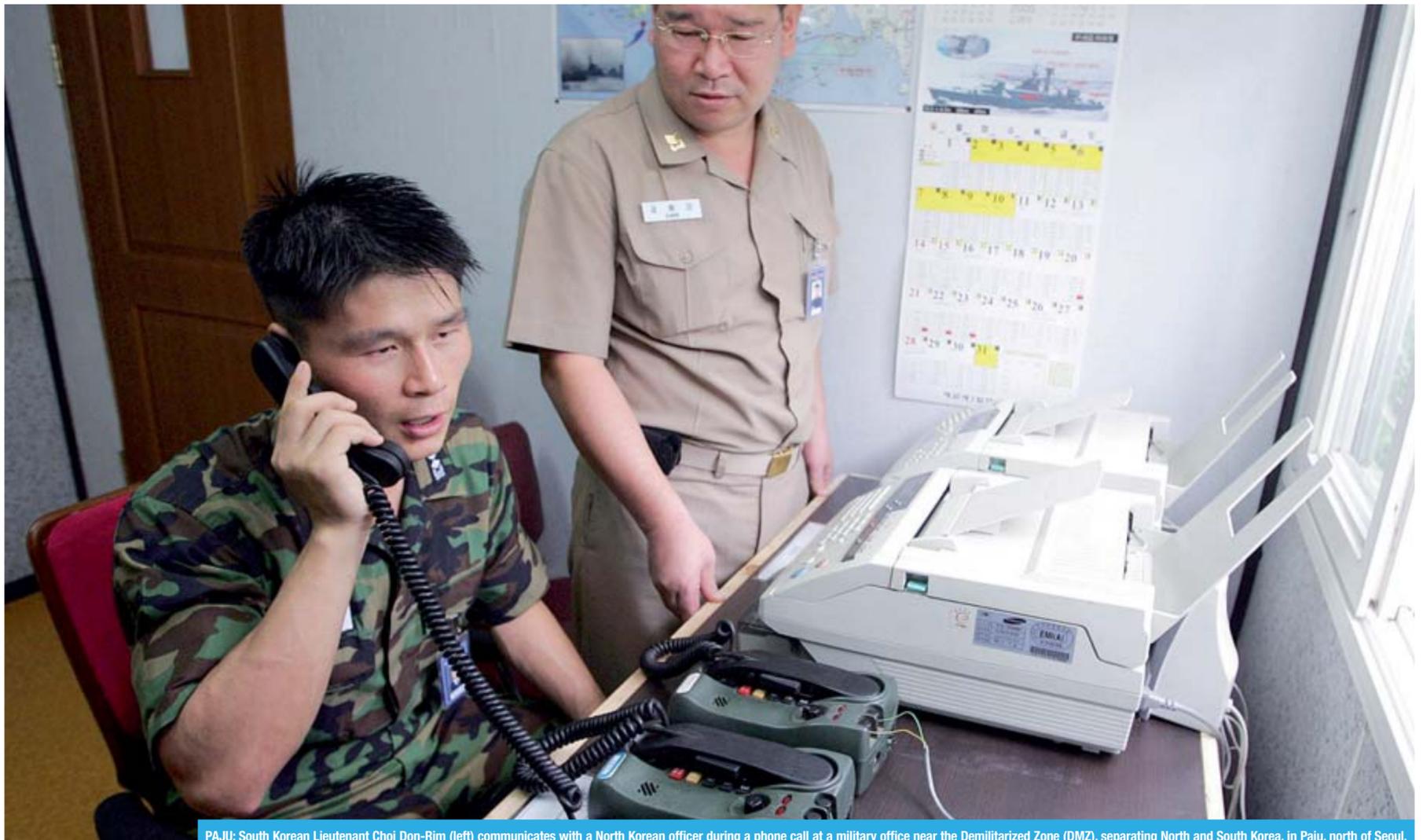




US accuses Pakistan of playing 'double game'

## Iran 'recruiting Palestinian militants' via South Africa



PAJU: South Korean Lieutenant Choi Don-Rim (left) communicates with a North Korean officer during a phone call at a military office near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), separating North and South Korea, in Paju, north of Seoul, as the two countries tested a hotline aimed at helping avoid naval confrontations in the Yellow Sea. —AFP

# Trump boasts of 'bigger' nuclear button

## North Korea reopens border hotline

SEOUL: North Korea reopened a long-closed border hotline with South Korea yesterday, hours after US President Donald Trump appeared to mock the North's leader by saying he has a "bigger and more powerful" nuclear button than he does. The North's decision to open the border phone line came a day after South Korea proposed high-level discussions amid a tense standoff over North Korea's missile and nuclear programs. That followed North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's New Year address in which he said he was open to speaking with the South and would consider sending a delegation to the Winter Olympics to be held just across the border in Pyeongchang in February.

US officials said Washington would not take any talks between North and South Korea seriously if they did not contribute to denuclearizing North Korea. A State Department spokeswoman said North Korea "might be trying to drive a wedge of some sort". Kim ordered the reopening of the hotline at the truce village of Panmunjom at 0630 GMT yesterday, when South Korean officials at the border received a call from the North, the South's unification ministry said in a text message. Officials on both sides

were checking the line and conducting a conversation for about 20 minutes, the contents of which were not disclosed by the ministry.

That gesture came only hours after Trump, who has mocked Kim as "Little Rocket Man", again ridiculed the North Korean leader on Twitter. "Will someone from his depleted and food starved regime please inform him that I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his, and my Button works!" Trump tweeted. Trump and Kim have exchanged a series of bellicose comments in recent months, raising alarm across the world, with Trump at times dismissing the prospect of a diplomatic solution to a

crisis in which North Korea has threatened to destroy the United States.

While appearing to open the door to discussing taking part in the Winter Olympics, Kim also warned that he would push ahead with "mass producing" nuclear warheads in defiance of UN sanctions. His New Year's Day speech came after a steep increase in missile launches in 2017, as well as the North's sixth and most powerful nuclear test. Kim, who has

vowed to develop a nuclear-tipped missile capable of reaching the United States, said he had a nuclear button on his desk.

### 'Serious and sincere'

The hotline with the South was shut down by North Korea in February 2016 in retaliation against the closing of a border factory town that was jointly operated by the two Koreas. "We will try to keep close communications with the south Korean side from sincere stand(sic) and honest attitude, true to the intention of our supreme leadership, and deal with the practical matters related to the dispatch of our delegation," the North's KCNA news agency quoted Ri Son Gwon, chairman of North Korea's Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland, as saying.

The talks would aim to establish formal dialogue about sending a North Korean delegation to the Olympics, Ri said. South Korean presidential spokesman Yoon Young-chan said the North's decision to open the hotline had "significant meaning" because it could lead to constant communication. US officials had voiced skepticism about the possibility of meaningful talks, particularly if they did not take steps towards banning North Korea's nuclear weapons. Nikki Haley, the US ambassador to the United Nations, warned North Korea against staging another missile test and said Washington was hearing reports that Pyongyang might be preparing to fire another missile. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said both sides should seize the Olympics as an opportunity to improve ties and make concrete efforts toward alleviating tension. "All relevant sides



This combo shows US President Donald Trump (left) and North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un. US President Donald Trump warned Kim Jong-Un he has a 'much bigger' nuclear button than the North Korean leader. —AFP

should grab hold of this positive trend in the Korean peninsula and move in the same direction," Geng told a daily news briefing in Beijing. North Korea regularly threatens to destroy South Korea, the United States and Japan, and says its weapons are necessary to counter US aggression. The United States stations 28,500 troops in the South, a legacy of the 1950-53 Korean War. —Reuters



## US downplays talks, urges North to abandon nuclear weapons

## Caste protests rock Mumbai

MUMBAI: Demonstrators from India's lowest caste blocked roads and railways across Mumbai yesterday in protest against violence involving Hindu nationalist groups at an event commemorating a 200-year-old battle. Members of the Dalit community obstructed roads, damaged buses and marched down railway tracks, delaying train services which are the lifeline of India's bustling financial capital.

Some schools and business opted to close as a precaution while the city's famous lunchbox delivery men, called "Dabbawalas", also cancelled their services. The protests came in response to violence which broke out at a ceremony in a village near Pune in Maharashtra state on Monday, leaving one man dead. Dalits had gathered to celebrate the anniversary of the Bhima-Koregaon battle in 1818, in which they helped British colonial forces defeat the high-caste Peshwas.

Dalit leaders accused right-wing Hindus of inciting Monday's clashes, which spread to other areas of Maharashtra of which Mumbai is the capital. The state government has ordered a judicial inquiry into the clashes. Mumbai police said more than 100 demonstrators had been arrested and nine cases of unlawful activity had been registered. Yesterday politicians called for a peaceful end to the violence. —AFP

## Winter storm hits Europe

PARIS: Winter storm Eleanor swept into France, Belgium and the Netherlands yesterday after tearing through England and Northern Ireland, cutting power to tens of thousands while forcing airports and train services to halt operations. Heavy winds led the airports in Strasbourg and Basel-Mulhouse on France's border with Germany and Switzerland to close after gusts of more than 110 kilometers per hour were recorded. France's civil aviation authority told AFP, before they were reopened shortly after midday. Nine people were reported injured in France—four critically—and another in the Netherlands after a tree fell on a person in the southern village of Heesch.

At Paris's Charles de Gaulle airport, 60 percent of departures were delayed yesterday morning, as were a third of arrivals, while a handful of flights had to be rerouted before the winds eased back a bit. The winds were also wreaking havoc with train services in several French regions as officials issued severe weather warnings for 44 departments until early today.

About 200,000 homes across northern France were without electricity, while "particularly intense" flooding was expected on the Atlantic coasts. The Eiffel Tower, which attracts six million visitors a year, was closed until yesterday afternoon, while worries about falling tree branches prompted Paris officials to close all city parks for the day.

### 'Woken people up'

Eleanor barreled into continental Europe after whipping across England, Northern Ireland and Ireland, with the Thames Barrier, one of the largest movable flood barriers in the world, closed as a precautionary measure to protect London from swelling tides. "We have seen some heavy showers push through across the south of the UK along with hail, loud thunder and lightning, which has woken people up," said meteorologist Becky Mitchell.

Gusts of 160 kmh were recorded at Great Dun Fell in Westmorland, northwest England, while overturned vehicles and trees caused closures of major motorways. In Ireland, power supply company ESB said electricity had been restored to 123,000 customers, while 27,000 remained without power. Streets around



LONDON: Waves crash over the tidal wall as a motorist travels along the coastal road in New Brighton, north west England yesterday as Storm Eleanor swept over the country. —AFP

the docks in Galway on the west coast were flooded after high tides breached the sea defenses, prompting the deployment of about two dozen troops to support flood defence efforts.

Belgium was also put on "orange" alert, the third of four warning levels, with officials urging people to exercise caution when venturing out, in particular because of falling tree branches and other objects. Although the winds eased toward midday,

rescue workers in Brussels were kept busy with about 70 calls across the city, mainly after trees were knocked down, and several parks were closed. In the Netherlands, 252 of about 1,200 flights were cancelled at Amsterdam's Schiphol airport, a main European hub, as weather alerts were issued for several regions. Several main roads and train lines were also closed as officials rushed to prepare flooding defenses. —AFP