

International

North Korea fires projectiles after offering talks with US

Pyongyang urged to stop escalating tensions in the region

SEOUL: North Korea yesterday fired projectiles into the sea, South Korea's military said, hours after Pyongyang said it was willing to hold working-level talks this month with the United States. Negotiations between Pyongyang and Washington have been gridlocked since a second summit between the North's leader Kim Jong Un and US President Donald Trump in February ended without a deal.

North Korea twice launched "unidentified projectiles" yesterday morning in an easterly direction. The objects flew approximately 330 kilometers from the Kaechon area in South Pyongan province, according to the South Korean military. "We urge the North to stop such acts that escalate tensions in the region," South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said in a statement.

No further details were immediately available but it was the latest in a series of provocations. Previous launches have been identified as short-range missiles. "We are aware of reports of projectiles launched from North Korea," a senior US official said. "We are continuing to monitor the situation and consulting closely with our allies in the region."

Trump and Kim had agreed to restart working-level dialogue during an impromptu meeting at the Demilitarized Zone dividing the nuclear-armed North and South Korea in June, but those talks have yet to begin. "We have willingness to sit with the US side for comprehensive discussions of the issues we have so far taken up at the time and place to be agreed late in September," Choe Son Hui, the North's vice foreign minister, said in a statement carried on Monday by the official Korean Central News Agency.

Choe's comment followed her warning in late August that North Korea's "expectations of dialogue with the US are gradually disappearing", after Pyongyang conducted a series of weapons tests to protest joint US-

South Korean military exercises. Asked about the proposal for lower-level talks in September, Trump told reporters: "I have a very good relationship with Chairman Kim. I always say having meetings is a good thing. We'll see what happens."

The period suggested by North Korea would correspond with the United Nations General Assembly in New York. On Monday, Choe recalled Kim's comments that the North would wait until the end of the year for Washington to "quit its current calculation method" and urged the US to come up with an "acceptable" offer or risk jeopardizing the entire diplomatic process. When asked by AFP about the latest North Korean offer, a State Department official replied: "We don't have any meetings to announce at this time."

Nuclear warhead development

Kim and Trump adopted a vaguely-worded statement on the "complete denuclearization of the Korean peninsula" at their first summit in Singapore in June last year, but little progress has since been made on dismantling Pyongyang's nuclear program. A report published by a United Nations panel of experts last week said North Korea's development of nuclear warheads has not stopped, despite the moratorium it declared on nuclear blasts and long-range missile launches.

US officials have called North Korea's recent short-range missile launches provocations, although Trump himself has avoided criticizing them. North Korea is under heavy US and UN sanctions over its weapons programs, and has criticized Washington's position that sanctions against the isolated regime will not be lifted until the country gives up its nuclear weapons.

Pyongyang's latest comments on talks come after the US special envoy to North Korea, Stephen Biegun,



SEOUL: A man watches a television news screen showing footage of a North Korean missile launch, at a railway station in Seoul yesterday. —AFP

said the North must stop blocking nuclear talks. "If we are to succeed, North Korea must set aside its search for obstacles to negotiations and instead seek the opportunities for engagement while that opportunity

lasts," he said on Friday. "We have made clear to North Korea that we are prepared to engage as soon as we hear from them," he said on Friday. "We are ready, but we cannot do this by ourselves." —AFP

Islamabad warns of genocide in Kashmir

GENEVA: Pakistan's foreign minister demanded yesterday that the UN launch an international investigation into the situation in Indian Kashmir, warning of the risk of "genocide" in the Muslim-majority region. "The people of Indian Occupied Jammu and Kashmir are apprehending the worst," Shah Mehmood Qureshi told the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, adding "I shudder to mention the word genocide here, but I must."

India imposed a military clampdown on Kashmir from August 5 to prevent unrest as New Delhi revoked the disputed region's autonomy. Mobile phone networks and the internet are still cut off in all but a few pockets. Kashmir, split between India and Pakistan since 1947, has been the spark for two major wars and countless clashes between the two nuclear-armed arch-rivals.

"For the last six weeks, India has transformed Occupied Jammu and Kashmir into the largest prison on this planet," Qureshi insisted. "The forlorn, traumatized towns, moun-

tains, plains and valleys of Indian Occupied Jammu and Kashmir reverberate today, with the grim reminders of Rwanda, Srebrenica, the Rohingya, and the pogrom of Gujarat," he said. The minister accused India of having arrested more than 6,000 people without due process. Many had been "shipped to jails all over India", he said.

His comments came after Indian authorities tightened the security lockdown in Kashmir on Sunday after breaking up religious processions by Shiite Muslims who defied a ban.

'Red Herring'?

Qureshi yesterday slammed India's references to "cross-border terrorism" to justify its crackdown as a "red herring to divert international opinion", and said he feared India might "even attack Pakistan". He also insisted that India's labeling of the Kashmir situation as an "internal affair" was "patently false", pointing out that the matter had been on the UN agenda for seven decades. The minister urged the council to heed recommendations by UN rights chief Michelle Bachelet and her predecessor Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein to launch a so-called international Commission of Inquiry (COI) into the Kashmir situation. A COI is one of the UN's highest-level probes, generally reserved for major crises like the Syrian conflict.

The council must "take steps to

would launch an inquiry — if the boy filed a report.

'Vocal minority'

Kashmir has been split between India and Pakistan since 1947. In the Indian-administered part, tens of thousands of people, mostly civilians, have died in an insurgency since 1989.

However, and despite restrictions on movement that were reinforced this week, there have been hundreds of protests and stone-throwing incidents. According to multiple sources, several thousand people have been detained. They include almost all the region's top politicians - without charge. The internet and mobile phones also remain cut off in the Kashmir Valley, the main trouble area. UN rights chief Michelle Bachelet said Monday she is "deeply concerned".

'Lies'

Last month AFP spoke to relatives of three people they alleged have died as a result of the actions of security forces, including a mother-of-two after a tear gas canister smashed through her window. On August 25 the governor of Jammu and Kashmir state, Satya Pal Malik, said there had not been a "single case of killing" in the previous 10 days.

The same day police said that a truck driver was killed on August 25 after being hit by a stone hurled by protesters. Last week Asrar Khan, 17, became the latest fatality when he died in hospital on September 3, a month after being seriously injured. Khan was



KASHMIR: Indian government forces stop Kashmiri civilians at a checkpoint during heavy restrictions on movements in Srinagar on the 10th day of the holy Islamic month of Muharram. —AFP

bring to justice the perpetrators of human rights violations of the innocent Kashmiri people, and in this context, constitute a Commission of Inquiry," Qureshi said. "If India has nothing to hide, it should allow unhindered access to the Commission of Inquiry," he insisted. Pakistan was willing to provide access to its side of the so-called Line of Control, he added. Pakistan is expected to present a resolution to the council for consideration by the end of the 42nd session on September 27.

At the opening of the council session on Monday, Bachelet also voiced alarm at the situation in Kashmir. She had "appealed particularly to India to ease the current lockdowns or curfews, to ensure people's access to basic services, and that all due process rights are respected for those who have been detained", she said. "It is important that the people of Kashmir are consulted and engaged in any decision-making processes that have an impact on their future," she added. —AFP



KASHMIR: Shaheena (2nd left), the mother of 17-year-old Asrar Khan cries with relatives as they look at picture of the youth, who she says died after being fired upon and seriously injured by Indian paramilitary soldiers in Srinagar. —AFP

playing cricket near his home in Kashmir's main city Srinagar on August 6 when soldiers fired at him, his mother said.

"A CRPF vehicle stopped near the edge of the park and fired a tear gas shell straight at his head," Shaheena said as she cried in her home, supported by other women. "I saw him fall and then they (soldiers) fired pellets on him." Senior army officer Lieutenant General Kanwal Jeet Singh Dhillon told reporters on September 4 that Khan was hit by protesters throwing stones. Khan's hospital records, seen by AFP, showed he suffered "severe traumatic

brain injury" and cited "pellet injury with shell blast injury" as the cause of death.

On Saturday the Indian government appeared to row back on Dhillon's statement, saying the cause of death was a "hard and blunt object" - but without saying what. Khan's angry father Firdous Ahmad, showing a photo and X-ray of his son's face, said Dhillon was "lying" and there were no protests the day he was hurt. "My son will not come back, but I want the world to know the truth and see what is being done to our children in Kashmir," Ahmad said. —AFP

Clean energy or food? Asian nations grapple with new demands

BANGKOK: Huge renewable energy projects planned in Asia, such as solar parks and hydropower dams, risk accelerating the conversion of farmland, uprooting communities and destroying livelihoods, energy experts and human rights activists warned yesterday. As they look to curb climate changing emissions, some of the most rapid transitions to renewable energy are taking place in countries such as China, India and across Southeast Asia.

But with many in the region still dependent on farming and fishing, there is a real risk that large-scale renewable energy projects will change land use and hurt poor communities, said Harjeet Singh, global climate change lead at charity ActionAid. "This shift and expansion will have significant implications for farmers, indigenous communities, ecosystems and water sources. The risks include land grabbing, destruction of forests and water bodies, and displacement," he said.

"There is a need to ensure that the new solutions don't create different injustices, inequalities, and cause more environmental destruction", including from mining for minerals such as copper, cobalt, lithium and rare earth metals, he said. More than three people were murdered each week last year while protecting their land from encroaching industries, with a four-fold increase in killings related to conflicts over water, according to Britain-based human rights group Global Witness. —Reuters

Schools shut as forest-fire haze blankets SE Asia

JAMBI: Huge fires are raging across vast swathes of Indonesia's rainforests - some of the world's biggest - with toxic smog shutting hundreds of schools in Southeast Asia, officials said yesterday. Massive jungle areas in Sumatra and Borneo islands are ablaze as thousands of personnel battle to quell the fires, frequently started to clear land for crop plantations. Burning forests to make way for farming is also thought to be behind the enormous fires currently ripping through the Amazon in South America, and experts believe they could have a serious impact on the global climate.

In Indonesia the number of hotspots - areas at risk of fires - has soared in parts, including on Borneo which the country shares with Malaysia and Brunei. Air quality has dropped to "unhealthy" levels in and around Kuala Lumpur, according to the government's air pollutant index, and the skyline has been shrouded in thick smog.

The smell of burning foliage filled the air, and residents were suffering respiratory problems and complained of itchy and sore eyes. "It makes your eyes hurt and causes breathing problems," Indonesian tourist Indah Sulistia told AFP in Kuala Lumpur. "The haze also creates problems for snapping photos," she added. Haze also hung over Singapore, while residents in parts of southern Thailand were advised to wear face masks this week.

Around 400 schools were closed yesterday in nine districts of Malaysia's Sarawak state on Borneo, with more than 150,000 students affected, according to the local education department. In neighboring Indonesia's Jambi province, on Sumatra, some kindergartens will be closed until Friday, while elementary and junior high schools are also temporarily shut, according to local authorities, who did not give exact numbers. Jambi mayor Syarif Fasha urged residents to wear face masks while Malaysia's national disaster management agency said it has secured half a million masks, which will be sent to the Sarawak state disaster committee. —AFP