

International

North Korea vows to send anti-South leaflets amid rising tensions

Two Koreas still technically at war as 1950-53 conflict ended without a treaty

SEOUL: North Korea pledged to push ahead with its campaign to send propaganda leaflets into South Korea, saying it is not bound to any inter-Korean agreements, state media said yesterday.

Tension has been rising after North Korea blew up a joint liaison office and threatened military action over defectors in the South sending anti-North leaflets across the border. As state media reported angry North Koreans gearing up for their own "large-scale" leaflet campaign, Seoul's Unification Ministry handling cross-border affairs on Saturday urged the plan to be scrapped citing a violation of peace agreements.

The United Front Department of the North's ruling party, in charge of inter-Korean affairs, rejected the ministry's calls as an "absurd nonsense."

"Given their own wrongdoings, how dare they utter such words as regret and violation?" the department's spokesman said in a statement carried by state media KCNA. "When they are put in our shoes, the South Korean authorities will be able to understand even a bit how disgustedly we looked at them and how offending it was for us."

The two Koreas, which are still technically at war as their 1950-53 conflict ended without a peace treaty, have waged leaflet campaigns for decades but agreed to cease "all hostile acts" in a 2018 peace accord.

Several defector-led groups have regularly sent back flyers, together with food, \$1 bills, mini radios and USB sticks containing South Korean dramas and news, usually by balloon over the border or in bottles in rivers.

One of the groups dropped a plan to float hundreds of plastic bottles stuffed with rice, medicine and face masks into the sea near the border yesterday.

Pyongyang has also used balloons and drones to fly its anti-South leaflets, which in South Korea in the past have been rewarded with stationery if reported to police.

Heightened tensions

North Korea has upped the pressure over the campaigns with a dramatic demolition of a building on its side of the border that symbolized inter-Korean rapprochement, threats to bolster its military presence at the border, and now leaflets of its own. "Enraged" North Koreans are now "pushing forward with the



Inter-Korean ties remain in deep freeze

preparations for launching a large-scale distribution" of "leaflets of punishment" into the South, the official KCNA news agency said.

"Every action should be met with proper reaction and only when one experiences it oneself, one can feel how offending it is." Photos carried by the official Rodong Sinmun newspaper showed North Koreans preparing the leaflets, and cigarette butts and ashes scattered over flyers featuring the face of South Ko-



This undated picture released by North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) on Saturday shows North Koreans preparing anti-Seoul leaflets at an undisclosed location in North Korea. — AFP

rean President Moon Jae-in.

Moon, who has long favored engagement with the North, was targeted earlier this week by Kim Yo Jong—the powerful sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un—in an extensive diatribe, calling him "disgusting" and "impudent". Seoul retorted with unusually stern criticism to Pyongyang's latest denunciations of Moon and its blowing up of the liaison office this week,

saying it will "no longer tolerate" the North's "unreasonable acts and words".

Inter-Korean relations have been in deep freeze for months, following the collapse of a summit in Hanoi between Kim Jong Un and US President Donald Trump. That meeting foundered on what the nuclear-armed North would be willing to give up in exchange for a loosening of sanctions. — Agencies

Indonesia's Mt Merapi erupts

JAKARTA: Indonesia's Mount Merapi, one of the world's most active volcanoes, erupted twice yesterday sending clouds of grey ash 6,000 meters into the sky, the country's geological agency said.

The two eruptions lasted around seven minutes, according to the agency, and prompted local authorities to order residents to stay outside a three-kilometer no-go zone around the rumbling crater near Indonesia's cultural capital Yogyakarta.

The agency did not raise the volcano's alert status after the eruptions, but it advised commercial planes to be cautious in the area. Local media reported that people in neighboring areas including Sleman and Klanten heard strong rumbling sounds this morning.

Mount Merapi's last major eruption in 2010 killed more than 300 people and forced the evacuation of some 280,000 residents from surrounding areas. That was its most powerful eruption since 1930, which killed around 1,300 people,

while another explosion in 1994 took about 60 lives.

Indonesia has more than 17,000 islands and islets—and nearly 130 active volcanoes. The Southeast Asian archipelago nation sits on the Pacific "Ring of Fire", a vast zone of geological instability where the collision of tectonic plates causes frequent quakes and major volcanic activity. 10 missing after fishing boat capsizes off Indonesia

Fishermen missing
Meanwhile, ten people were missing after a boat carrying 16 fishermen capsized in Indonesian waters near the Anak Krakatau volcano, officials said Saturday. Indonesia's search and rescue agency said the motorboat sank on Thursday after being hit by strong waves in the Sunda Strait.

"Six were rescued alive on Friday and we continue searching for the 10 people still missing today," Indonesia's search and rescue agency spokesman Muhammad Yusuf Latif told AFP on Saturday. The group had attempted to swim to nearby Rakata island, he added.

"Six returned to the capsized boat and they were rescued. But the other 10 continued swimming and their whereabouts remain unknown," Latif said. Rescue teams expanded their search for survivors on Saturday. — AFP



YOGYAKARTA: This handout photo taken and released yesterday by Indonesia's Research and Technology Development for Geological Hazard Mitigation (BPPTKG) shows the Merapi Mount volcano spewing thick smoke into the air as seen from Yogyakarta. — AFP

Virus fears fuel bicycle sales in Bangladesh cities

DHAKA: Dhaka commuters hitting the streets again after a months-long lockdown are opting for bikes to maintain social distancing—and discovering that pedal power is a way to beat the city's notorious traffic.

Bangladesh lifted restrictions on movement at the end of May to revive its stuttering economy, including on the fume-spewing three-wheelers and crowded buses that serve as public transport in the capital. But the city's snarling gridlock—in which cars often crawl along at a snail's pace—has yet to return to pre-pandemic levels.

That's partly because many are staying home over lingering fears they will catch the virus. But for increasing numbers thronging Dhaka's Bangshal Bike Bazar—home to some 150 speciality stores—pedalling to work or school is becoming the new normal.

"Bike sales have grown to a historic high," shop owner Mohammad Ibrahim, who now sells nine bicycles a day instead of three, told AFP. "Most people now avoid buses, taxis or auto rickshaws... (and) buying bicycles as alternatives."

Salesman Abdus Sobhan said mid-range bicycles selling at 10,000-25,000 taka (\$US120-\$300) had sold out. "I think a bicycle would be much safer for my commute," college student and part-time call-center worker Toufikul Islam told AFP as he bought a new two-wheeler. Rezoan Mahub, a senior executive at a paper-importing firm, said the lockdown made him realize the benefits of owning a pushbike.

"Bicycles are more convenient than cars or motorbikes," he said. Other major cities are experiencing similar spikes in sales, the Bangladesh Bicycle Merchant Assembling and Importers Association told AFP. "This year... we expect bike sales will double," association spokesman Mohammad Rasel said of the \$500 million market, where around 1.5 million pushbikes are sold each year. Mahub said he was optimistic that the turn to two-wheelers in Dhaka would see residents breathing cleaner air in the city. — AFP

Internet blackout in Rakhine enters 2nd year

YANGON: The internet shutdown in Myanmar's conflict-ridden northwest, described by rights groups as the world's longest, entered a second year yesterday with locals and campaigners appealing for an end to the blackout as coronavirus fears grip the region.

The Myanmar military has been embroiled in a bloody civil war since January 2019 against the Arakan Army (AA), an insurgent group fighting for more autonomy for ethnic Rakhine Buddhists. The government shut down mobile data in several townships across Rakhine state and neighboring Chin state on June 21 last year, causing panic among residents desperate for information about the unrest.

Human Rights Watch had called on Friday for an immediate end to "the world's longest government-enforced internet shutdown".

"It's critical for civilians to get the information needed to stay safe" during a global pandemic, said HRW's Linda Lakshmir. The country has so far recorded 287 coronavirus cases including six deaths, but experts fear the low numbers are due to a lack of testing. A government official said earlier this month the internet shutdown would continue until at least August 1 in eight townships.

Telecom companies said the government ordered the blackout to prevent "illegal activities". The conflict has displaced

Beijing reports 22 new virus cases as millions tested

BEIJING: China's capital reported 22 new cases of the coronavirus yesterday after a mass testing effort that has collected more than two million samples in a race to contain a new outbreak.

The fresh cluster in Beijing has raised fears of a resurgence of the virus in China, which had largely brought the disease under control over recent months.

Dozens of communities have been sealed off in the city to contain the spread, with residents told to avoid non-essential travel and schools closed. The new infections reported yesterday include a nurse—the first health worker to test positive since the re-emergence of the illness just over a week ago.

More than 220 people have tested positive in the new cluster. State news agency Xinhua said local authorities had set up more than 2,000 sites across the city that had obtained 2.3 million samples.

The latest outbreak first emerged at a wholesale food market, prompting fears over the safety of the city's food supply. The virus was detected on chopping boards used to handle imported salmon. Beijing officials on Friday advised citizens to dispose of frozen seafood and bean products bought from the site.

The Xinfadi market supplies more than 70 percent of Beijing's fresh produce and



In this file photo, Mro ethnic people displaced from the surge of fighting between ethnic armed rebel group of the Arakan Army and government troops take refuge at a compound of a Buddhist pagoda are seen during a government-organized visit for journalists in Buthidaung township in the restive Rakhine state. — AFP

tens of thousands of civilians and seen hundreds injured and scores killed, with both the military and the AA trading allegations of abuses.

Few in Myanmar have personal computers, with the majority relying on mobile phones to access the internet for communications and information—making those under the blackout especially vulnerable to COVID-19. Rights groups have also condemned the blocking of several local media websites and are urging telecom firms to push back against the government's orders.

Rakhine state is also home to the Rohingya, a Muslim minority group that faced a brutal crackdown by the military in 2017.

Some 750,000 fled to neighboring Bangladesh in violence that has led to charges of genocide against Myanmar at the UN's top court.

The 600,000 Rohingya remaining in Rakhine live in what Amnesty International has branded "apartheid conditions", with little freedom of movement. "We want to know more information regarding COVID-19, what's happening to the displaced people in Sittwe (Rakhine's capital) and what's happening in Bangladesh," Abdullah, a Rohingya resident from Mrauk U township, told AFP by phone. They now struggle to contact relatives, send them money or even check the weather forecast, he added. — AFP



BEIJING: People wearing face masks queue to take a swab test during mass testing for the COVID-19 coronavirus in Beijing yesterday. — AFP

has been closed. On Friday officials said they had launched a nationwide campaign to inspect food imports. Employees of restaurants, supermarkets, markets and food delivery couriers are being tested for the virus, Xinhua said.

The chief epidemiologist at the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention told reporters Friday that the new outbreak had been "brought under control" but Beijing would still see new cases.

"People who have not been exposed to the Xinfadi market between May 30 and June 12 are at a very low risk of being infected and do not have to make an appointment for nucleic acid testing," Liu Xiaofeng,

deputy director of the Beijing Center for Disease Control, said Saturday. The outbreak has also spread to Tongzhou, the administrative hub in Beijing where key government offices are located, health officials said. One case was reported in the area yesterday.

China recorded 26 new cases nationwide yesterday including three domestic infections in Hebei province, which neighbours Beijing. One of the patients worked at the Xinfadi market. Health officials also confirmed a new imported case. Infections brought in by Chinese nationals returning home had accounted for the majority of recent cases until the Beijing cluster. — AFP