

International

N Korean army gives brutal show of 'strength, bravery and morale'

UN rights warns of North Korea 'starvation risk'

SEOUL: A shirtless soldier smashes two glass bottles together, adding to a pile of shards on the ground as North Korean leader Kim Jong Un looks on, grinning. The man lies down on the debris and a comrade puts a thick concrete block on his chest, before smashing it with a sledgehammer. The scene was part of a pain-defying display put on by the North Korean army for the opening of a defense exhibition this week that

showcased the nuclear-armed country's weapons. The soldiers—some in uniform, others topless—punched their way through layers of concrete bricks, or broke them with their heads. Others were hammered on their arm or hand, and one lay on a bed of nails to have a block broken on his chest. Leader Kim looked on clapping and smiling, surrounded by officers and with his sister and close adviser Kim Yo Jong at his side, footage on state broadcaster KCTV showed Tuesday.

bravery and morale of the Korean People's Army," newsreader Ri Chun-hee—the North's most famous presenter—said over the images. The arms exhibition—at which Kim blamed the United States for tensions on the peninsula and accused the South of hypocrisy—is part of the commemorations for the anniversary of the foundation of the ruling Workers' Party. Kim has overseen rapid progress in Pyongyang's banned nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs, which have earned it multiple international sanctions. And Ri did not forget to declare the source of the participants' strength. It was "bestowed upon them by our dear leader Kim Jong Un", she said.

'Starvation risk'

Meanwhile, North Korea's most vulnerable are "at risk of starvation" with the economy worsening due to a self-imposed coronavirus blockade, and UN sanctions imposed over the country's nuclear programs should be eased, a UN human rights expert said yesterday. The impoverished nation has been behind a rigid blockade since early last year to protect itself from the pandemic, with the economy suffering and trade with key partner China dwindling to a trickle. In June, state-run KCTV admitted North Korea was facing a "food crisis", sounding the alarm in a country with a moribund agricultural sector that has long struggled to feed the population.

The same month, leader Kim Jong Un said the food situation was "getting tense". Ordinary North Koreans are "struggling on a daily basis... to live a life of dignity", and the worsening humanitarian situation could "turn into a crisis", Tomas Ojea Quintana, UN special rapporteur on human rights, said in his latest report. Pyongyang is under multiple sets of international sanctions over its nuclear and ballistic missile programs, which have seen rapid progress under Kim.



PYONGYANG: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un (2nd right) watches a demonstration flight during the opening ceremony of the defense development exhibition 'Self-Defence-2021' in Pyongyang. — AFP

Quintana said such restrictions should be eased to protect the country's most vulnerable in the face of a severe food shortage. "The most vulnerable children and elderly are at risk of starvation," he said. "Sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council should be reviewed and eased when necessary to both facilitate humanitarian and lifesaving assistance." The report comes about three months after the UN's Food and Agricultural Organization said North Korea was facing a food shortage of around 860,000 tons this year, and could experience a "harsh lean period".

Pyongyang has stayed away from talks on its nuclear program since the collapse of a second summit between Kim and then US president Donald Trump in Hanoi and has rebuffed South Korean efforts to revive dialogue. Under President Joe Biden, the United States has repeatedly declared its willingness to meet North Korean representatives, while saying it will seek denuclearization. But this week Kim blamed Washington for tensions on the peninsula, and insisted Pyongyang's weapons were for self-defense and not aimed at any particular country.— AFP



Kim Jong Un blames US for tensions

Korea has a long tradition of martial arts, and breaking is part of its indigenous sport of taekwondo—developed by a South Korean general who later fell out with the South's military-backed dictator Park Chung-hee and became a frequent visitor to Pyongyang, where he died in 2002. It is now often used by the North to symbolize its military prowess. "These soldiers, embraced and raised by our party, have demonstrated to the whole world the strength,



KANDAHAR: Young shepherds lead their goats in Arghandab district in the central part of Kandahar Province. — AFP

Anxiety and fear for women in Taliban stronghold

KANDAHAR: Afghan student Fauzia used to make ends meet voicing ads on a radio station in the Taliban heartland of Kandahar, but that came to an abrupt end when the Islamists swept to power in August. Their order was clear: No female voices on the air. Afghanistan's new rulers have promised more moderate governance than their last stint in power, when women were all but barred from work and education, and prohibited from leaving the house unchaperoned.

But there is widespread mistrust in their women's rights pledge. Most girls around the country have been barred from attending secondary school, and most women have been unable to return to work. When AFP visited Kandahar last month, only a few women were visible in the dusty shopping streets of the southern city, hastily lugging bags from store to store while wearing the head-to-toe burqa. The Taliban "posted messages on Facebook saying they did not want to hear any more music or female (voices) on air," said Fauzia, who asked not to use her real name.

The 20-year-old medical student's situation has become increasingly desperate after losing her income from radio ads—Fauzia and her four younger siblings are orphans, and she is struggling to put food on the table. Despite Taliban promises of a softer rule this time around, women remain depressed and unclear about their place in society, while businesses that once employed them are wary of upsetting the Islamists. Fauzia's former boss said the radio station felt forced to stop airing ads with women's voices. She has been handing out our resumes all over Kandahar, without any luck. "I am told to wait," she said.

'Bad looks from Taliban'

Since taking power, the Islamists have repeatedly said they will respect women's rights in the confines of Islamic law, without elaborating. Women, with some exceptions, have been barred from returning to work or education, and told that they must hold off until arrangements have been made, including the segregation of men and women. So far, "we haven't banned anything for women", Mullah Noor Ahmad Saeed, a Taliban official in Kandahar province said. "If they don't feel secure or don't go back to work, it is their fault."

But many are skeptical. "In the streets, people don't say anything, but we noticed bad looks from the Taliban," said Fereshteh Nazari, who has been able to return to work as the head of a girls-only primary school. Women teachers and girls, however, have been excluded from returning to secondary school. "Before we used to be happy to come to school. Now we're under stress," Nazari told AFP at the school. On the day AFP visited, some 700 students were present, less than a third of the 2,500 girls enrolled.

"Most parents don't send their girls to school after the age of 10 because they don't feel secure," Nazari said. Zohra, a mathematics major in her 20s who asked not to use her real name, is among the students staying away, her fear compounded by rumors of a looming violent Taliban crackdown. "For me, life is more important than anything else," she told AFP by phone.

For many women, the ability to work is crucial now more than ever as Afghanistan suffers a worsening economic crisis. It has had a severe impact even on the few women still allowed to work—Nazari and her teacher colleagues have not received their salaries since the Western-backed government collapsed in August. "Before, we had a good life. Now we might have to go and beg at the bazaar," said the headmistress, who is in her 20s. "My husband is jobless, and we have to feed our two kids."—AFP

Zionist, UAE ministers in US as Biden seeks to expand normalization

WASHINGTON: The top diplomats from Zionist entity and the United Arab Emirates are set to hold three-way talks in Washington as President Joe Biden's administration embraces and looks to expand a normalization drive. Concerns about Iran—the specter of which helped bring together Zionists and Gulf states when they established relations last year as part of the Abraham Accords—are expected to be high on the agenda after Biden's early diplomatic overtures to Tehran bore little immediate fruit.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will meet separately and together with Zionist Foreign Minister Yair Lapid and his Emirati counterpart Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, following a similar virtual event last month. Former president Donald Trump considered the so-called Abraham Accords to be a crowning achievement for his administration as the United Arab Emirates, followed shortly afterward by Bahrain and Morocco, became the first Arab states to normalize relations with Zionist entity in decades.

Despite their myriad policy differences, the Biden team has given credit to the Trump administration over the Abraham Accords, dismissing criticism that normalization ignores the plight of the Palestinians. Trump's approach was also seen as transactional as he agreed to sell state-of-the-art fighter-jets to the UAE and recognize Morocco's controversial claim over Western Sahara—moves that Biden has not changed. A senior State Department official said that the Abraham Accords can "help to achieve a more peaceful and prosperous Middle East."

"It's not a substitute to a two-state solution. We hope that normalization can be leveraged to advance progress on the Zionist-Palestinian track," the official told reporters on condition of anonymity. He said the three nations will announce working groups to expand cooperation on energy and water—a scarce resource in the Middle East—as well as religious coexistence. Both Zionists and the United Arab Emirates have boasted of dividends since signing their accord in the presence of Trump at the White House in September 2020.

Zionist entity has made progress in its long-term goal of ending its isolation in its near neighborhood, while the United Arab Emirates has voiced hope at \$1 trillion in new economic activity over the next decade through trade. The US official said the Biden administration was "actively working to expand" normalization but declined to give specifics. Sudan, under heavy arm-twisting from Trump, said last year it would seek relations with Zionists but has balked amid heavy pressure on the country's fragile new civilian-backed government.—AFP

value the whole group at 3.5-3.75 billion euros. OVHcloud competes with dominant American tech groups Amazon Web Services and Google to offer cloud computing services, which enable companies to store data remotely rather than on their own servers.

The French group pitches itself as a safe European alternative to its American rivals and guarantees that data are stored in accordance with EU laws. It enjoys strong political backing in Paris, which sees it as part of efforts to reduce Europe's reliance on the United States for security and technology. OVHcloud offered its "most sincere apologies" to clients and promised "the utmost transparency on the causes and consequences" of the outage.

The IPO by the group will be the third major public share offering by a French tech star following the flotation of music streaming company Believe in June and cybersecurity specialist Exclusive Networks in September. OVHcloud suffered a major fire at one of its facilities in eastern France in March this year that caused problems and outages for 12,000-16,000 clients.—AFP



NORD: This photograph shows the building and logo of the French company OVHcloud, one of Europe's biggest cloud computing groups, in Roubaix, northern France. — AFP

IT outage hits one of Europe biggest cloud computing groups

PARIS: A "human error" took down the servers of one of Europe's biggest cloud computing groups yesterday, causing thousands of websites to crash for more than an hour, the company said. OVHcloud, a French tech success story which is set to launch an initial public offering tomorrow, attributed the problem to an intervention on a part of its network in the United States following persistent cyber-attacks.

Octave Klaba, the Polish-born founder of the group, said it was "a human error" in a message posted on Twitter. The timing of the outage is embarrassing for the group which is hoping to sell shares worth 350 million euros (\$400 million) tomorrow, which would

News in brief

28 killed in Nepal accident

KATHMANDU: At least 28 people were killed and more than a dozen injured Tuesday after a packed passenger bus plunged off a road in a hilly region in northwestern Nepal, officials said. The accident in the remote Mugu region happened at around 12.30pm local time after a puncture to one of the front tyres, district official Rom Bahadur Mahat said. The bus was driving from the southern Banke district to the Mugu area and was believed to have been carrying at least 45 people, many travelling to celebrate the Hindu festival of Dashain. "The accident has killed 28 people, we are trying to identify the bodies. The injured are being treated in hospitals," Mahat added. — AFP

Malian jihadist apologizes

THE HAGUE: A Malian jihadist apologized on Tuesday for his role in destroying the fabled shrines of Timbuktu as he asked judges at the International Criminal Court to release him from prison. Ahmad Al-Faqi al-Mahdi, who was sentenced to nine years imprisonment in 2016, was a changed man who had learned to play guitar and to sew while in jail, his lawyer told the ICC. "I stand before you today to express to the whole world my remorse, my sadness and my regret for all the crimes I have committed in the past and the damage resulting from these crimes," Al-Mahdi told the court. "I assure you that I have completely separated myself from the world of crime and I will never return," added al-Mahdi, who had cut his long curly hair short and shaved his beard for the hearing. — AFP

Political prisoner dies of COVID

CARACAS: An army general who aligned with Venezuela's late Hugo Chavez but later broke ranks with the socialist strongman and spent years as a prominent political prisoner has died of COVID-19 while in custody, officials said Tuesday. "We regret the death of Raul Isaias Baduel from cardiorespiratory arrest as a consequence of COVID-19," prosecutor general Tarek Saab posted on Twitter. Baduel, 66, had received an initial COVID-19 vaccination and "was receiving appropriate medical care," Saab added. Baduel's family said they learned of his death via Twitter. "I have not received a call from any person in the government," his wife Cruz Zambrano de Baduel told the ETV internet channel. — AFP

Fresh fighting in Ethiopia's Afar

ADDIS ABABA: Fighting has resumed in northern Ethiopia's Afar region after a month-long lull, humanitarian and rebel sources said yesterday, as the government appeared to be pressing a new offensive. There were reports of an armed clash Tuesday in the town of Awra, in Afar's Fenti zone, including use of heavy weapons by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) that killed multiple civilians, the humanitarian sources said. The reports could not be independently verified and officials in Afar could not be reached for comment. TPLF spokesman Getachew Reda denied claims the rebels had used heavy weapons against civilians but confirmed there had been fresh hostilities in Afar. "Enemy forces are crumbling and in disarray in parts of Afar," he said, describing fighting along the border between Afar and Amhara regions. — AFP