

North Korea Tests Missiles for Third Time in a Week



People watch a TV showing a file picture of a North Korean missile for a news report on North Korea firing short-range ballistic missiles, in Seoul, South Korea, August 2, 2019.

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korea fired what appeared to be short-range ballistic missiles twice Friday into the sea off its eastern coast in its third round of weapons tests in just over a week, South Korea’s military and presidential office said.

The increased testing activity is seen as brinkmanship aimed at increasing pressure on Seoul and Washington over stalled nuclear negotiations. North Korea also has expressed frustration at planned U.S.-South Korea military exercises, and experts say its weapons displays could intensify in coming months if progress on the nuclear negotiations isn’t made.

Seoul’s Joint Chiefs of Staff said the

launches were conducted at 2:59 a.m. and 3:23 a.m. from an eastern coastal area and said the projectiles flew 220 kilometers (137 miles) on an apogee of 25 kilometers (15 miles) and at a max speed of Mach 6.9.

South Korea’s presidential office, which held an emergency meeting presided over by chief national security adviser Chung Eui-yong to discuss the launches, said the South Korean and U.S. militaries shared an assessment that the projectiles were likely newly developed short-range ballistic missiles the North has been testing in recent weeks. However, the office said further analysis was needed because the projectiles showed similar flight characteristics

with the weapons that the North test fired on Wednesday and described as a new rocket artillery system.

Kim Eun-han, a spokesman for South Korea’s Unification Ministry, said the Seoul government expressed “deep regret” over launches that it believes could hurt efforts for peace on the Korean Peninsula.

Japan’s Defense Ministry said it was analyzing the launch and that the projectiles did not reach Japanese territorial waters or its exclusive economic zone.

The North fired short-range ballistic missiles on July 25 and conducted what it described as a test firing of a new multiple rocket launcher system on Wednesday.

Amid the stalemate in nuclear negotiations with the United States, North Korea has significantly slowed diplomatic activity with the South while demanding Seoul turn away from Washington and proceed with joint economic projects that have been held back by U.S.-led sanctions against the North.

U.S. officials have downplayed the threat of the launches to the United States and its allies.

However, the North’s recent weapons demonstrations have dampened the optimism that followed President Donald Trump’s impromptu summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un on June 30 at the inter-Korean border. The leaders agreed to resume working-level nuclear talks that stalled since February, but there have been no known meetings between the two sides since then.

F-35 Program ‘Plagued’ by Troubles: Pentagon Told



The logo of Lockheed Martin is seen at Euronaval, the world naval defence exhibition in Le Bourget near Paris, France, October 23, 2018.

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - U.S. Senator Chuck Grassley asked newly confirmed Defense Secretary Mark Esper on Thursday about cost overruns and technical issues that have “plagued” the Pentagon’s high-priced F-35 fighter jet program.

The Department of Defense failed to keep adequate records on the program’s costs and installed parts that were not ready for use, according to reports from the Pentagon’s inspector general in March and June.

These shortfalls, Grassley said in a letter to Esper, have resulted in “financial waste and further delays to the mission readiness” of the plane and have “potentially jeopardized the lives” of pilots

who fly the F-35.

The Pentagon’s Joint Program Office, which manages the F-35 program, did not immediately respond to request for comment.

Lockheed Martin Corp, the lead contractor for the program, said in a statement that it “looks forward to partnering with” the Joint Program Office as the Pentagon adjusts procedures to address the reports.

The Lockheed parts installed by the Pentagon were not ready for installation because they lacked electronic records, the inspector general said in June. Defense Department employees instead turned to keeping manual records, the June report said.

Installing the parts inflated the flying time of “mission-ready” planes, and in turn inflated the incentive fees paid to Lockheed by the Defense Department for mission-ready flying hours, the June report said.

The Joint Program Office knew about the issue, but “did not take adequate steps” to resolve it, Grassley said, citing the June report.

An earlier report in March found the Pentagon “does not know the actual value” of government-purchased F-35 property because it failed to keep an independent record, leaving Lockheed and its subcontractor with the only record of the property, which Lockheed valued at \$2.1 billion.

The Department of Defense has no mechanism to verify Lockheed’s record, the March report said.

As long as these issues remain, they will “continue hemorrhaging money” from the program and threaten the planes’ readiness and safety, Grassley noted.

Meanwhile, reports by Israeli media suggest that the occupying regime pressured Washington behind the scenes to exclude Ankara from the F-35 fighter jet program in a bid to “preserve military qualitative edge”.

The reports said Tel Aviv fears that the sophisticated jets would give Turkey “advanced air capabilities”.

The occupying regime of Israel has signed an agreement with the U.S. to purchase 50 F-35 fighter jets. So far, it has taken delivery of 16 jets and the rest will be delivered by 2024.

Sudan Arrests Nine Soldiers Over Killing of Students

CAIRO (Reuters) -- Sudan’s military council spokesman said on Friday that nine soldiers from the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), the country’s most powerful paramilitary group, have been dismissed and detained in connection with the killing of protesters this week.

Lieutenant General Shams El Din Kabbashi added that the governor of North Kordofan state and its security council would also be held accountable for the killing of six people, including four schoolchildren, in the state capital El-Obeid on Monday.

Formerly known as the Janjaweed, the RSF fighters armed with assault rifles, machine guns mounted on trucks and rocket-propelled grenades are widely feared. They were hardened by war in Darfur against rebels who rose up against the government.

Opposition groups have accused the RSF, led by the deputy head of Sudan’s Transitional Military Council, of killing scores of protesters demanding a return to civilian rule since President Omar al-Bashir was ousted in April.

The RSF’s commander, General Mohamed Hamdan Daga-lo, known as Hemedti, has previously denied these claims and blamed “infiltrators” instead.

The main opposition coalition, the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), welcomed the action against the RSF members, saying it would prevent further violence.

Hundreds of thousands of Sudanese took to the streets on Thursday in response to the killings in El-Obeid, and opposition medics said four more protesters were killed and many injured by gunfire in Omdurman. Kabbashi said authorities were pursuing those suspected of involvement in the deaths in Omdurman.

His remarks came at a press conference after night of negotiations with opposition groups over a constitutional declaration, a document that would pave the way for a transitional government.

The two sides had signed a political deal in July setting a three-year transition period and a joint sovereign council. Talks over the constitutional declaration were called into question by the violence this week before being reconvened.

“The agreement is really now just around the corner,” Sateal-Hajj of the FFC said on Thursday as talks got underway.

African Union mediator for Sudan Mohamed Hassan Leblatt told the Friday news conference that talks were set to continue in the evening.

Russia Orders Probe Into Wildfires in Siberia



An aerial view through an aircraft window shows flame and smoke rising from a wildfire in Krasnoyarsk region, Russia in this handout picture obtained by Reuters on August 1, 2019.

MOSCOW (Reuters) – Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev ordered Russian police to investigate if wildfires in Siberia could have been started deliberately to conceal illegal logging activity, as army planes flew in to help firefighters battle the blazes.

Russia’s Investigative Committee also said it had opened a criminal case over the fires and was investigating officials in the Siberian city of Krasnoyarsk for suspected negligence at having not taken action to stop them.

The wildfires cover 3.1 million hectares of mostly remote, uninhabited forest, the Federal Forestry Agency said on Thursday.

Medvedev ordered the Interior Ministry, General Prosecutor’s Office and Investigative Committee to investigate if some fires had been started to conceal illicit logging and to report back to him by Nov. 1, TASS news agency reported.

Environmentalists have dubbed the fires an ecological catastrophe and a petition circulated online by an ecologist from Siberia had garnered 872,000 signatures as of Thursday demanding authorities take tougher action.

The Defense Ministry said 10 army transport planes and 10 helicopters had arrived in Krasnoyarsk, a day after President Vladimir Putin ordered the army to help firefighters battle the fires.

Regional authorities have said the wild-

fires have been caused by lightning after a long spell of hot weather, but Medvedev also raised the possibility of arson at a meeting in the Siberian city of Chita on Thursday.

Anton Beneslavsky, a Greenpeace activist, however, said the fires were caused by a combination of climate change and what he said were ineffective measures in place to bring forest fires under control.

Firefighters have been battling forest fires on 116,000 hectares in Siberia’s Irkutsk and several other regions, but other vast fires covering a total of 2.96 million hectares are only being monitored, the Federal Forestry Agency said.

NASA said in a statement on Wednesday its satellite imagery showed the smoke from fires, which collectively cover an area the size of Belgium, had wafted across Russia’s Siberia and Far East all the way to Alaska down the west coast of Canada.

More than 800 inhabited settlements, from villages to cities, have been shrouded in smoke in the regions of Krasnoyarsk, Yakutia and Irkutsk, TASS news agency cited the emergency services as saying.

In a rare phone call late on Wednesday, U.S. President Donald Trump offered his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin help in putting out fires. Putin told Trump that Moscow would take him up on his offer if needed.

Bombs Rock Bangkok During Pompeo’s Visit



Police Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) officers work following a small explosion at a site in Bangkok, Thailand, August 2, 2019.

BANGKOK (AFP) — Several small bombs exploded across Bangkok on Friday, rattling the Thai capital as it hosted a regional summit attended by U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and leaving three people wounded.

Thailand, which has a grim history of political violence, remains deeply divided after a controversial March election returned a Thai junta to power as a civilian government.

Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha, who led the junta, was told of “the bombing incidents and has ordered an immediate investigation,” Thai government spokeswoman Narumon Pinyosinwat said.

“Security measures have been tightened. The public is urged not to panic,” she added.

Small devices — believed to be so-called “ping pong bombs” around the size of a table tennis ball — exploded at several locations across the city. They appeared to be symbolic attacks aimed at embarrassing the government during the major summit but not designed to cause mass casualties.

“Three people received slight injuries from shrapnel,” said Renu Suesattaya, director of Suanluang district where the first bombs were reported.

“I received a report that they are ‘ping pong bombs’ hidden in bushes by the road.”

Two further explosions shattered glass near a well-known downtown skyscraper, emergency police added. Bomb disposal experts were deployed around the Mahanakorn Tower — owned by the King Power group that counts Leicester City football club among its assets.

At least three other blasts hit the area around a government complex, authorities said.

The bombings took place just before a keynote speech by Pompeo, who has joined the Southeast Asian Foreign Ministers meeting, in which he praised Thailand for rejoining the “democratic fold.”

Thailand’s government urged the media to avoid speculation on the motive for the bombings.

“We do not know yet how many people are involved,” deputy prime minister Prawit Wongsuwon told reporters, adding that “people who do it want to stir the situation.”

The blasts came weeks after former junta leader Prayut was inaugurated as a civilian prime minister, sparking outcry among many pro-democracy supporters in a kingdom scored by divisions.

The junta maneuvered itself back into power with the help of a fully appointed senate stacked with army loyalists and an electoral system its critics say was designed to limit the success of the pro-democracy parties.

News in Brief

WASHINGTON (AP) — The United States plans to test a new missile in coming weeks that would have been prohibited under a landmark, 32-year-old arms control treaty that the U.S. and Russia ripped up on Friday. Washington and Moscow walked out of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces treaty that President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev signed in 1987, raising fears of a new arms race. Russia pointed a finger at America. “The denunciation of the INF treaty confirms that the U.S. has embarked on destroying all international agreements that do not suit them for one reason or another,” the Russian Foreign Ministry said in a statement Friday. “This leads to the actual dismantling of the existing arms control system.” Exiting the treaty, however, could have an upside for the United States. Washington has complained for years that the arms control playing field was unfair. U.S. officials argued that not only was Russia violating the treaty and developing prohibited weapons, but that China also was making similar non-compliant weapons, leaving the U.S. alone in complying with the aging arms control pact.

PARIS (AFP) -- French farmers protesting against a trade deal with Canada dumped manure overnight outside the office of their local MP, a politician from President Emmanuel Macron’s LREM party. It’s the latest example of protesters vandalizing LREM offices to voice their discontent. Monique Iborra, an MP for Haute-Garonne in south-western France, wrote about the damage to her office on Twitter on Friday. The FDSEA farmers’ trade union claimed responsibility on their Facebook page. “Two tonnes of manure outside a building where there are also doctors, dentists and other professions which receive members of the public - it’s irresponsible as well as futile,” wrote Iborra. Anti-government protests have ignited again after the French Parliament approved the CETA trade deal, which opponents say undermines the EU’s social and ecological regulations by importing products made under conditions that would not be allowed in Europe.

BRASILIA (Reuters) -- Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro said on Thursday that if a senior government scientist had betrayed his confidence regarding deforestation data, he would be fired, underlining how growing international pressure to protect the Amazon is weighing on his government. Bolsonaro made the comments during a tense news conference in Brasilia. He and members of his cabinet pushed back against reports of a recent spike in deforestation in the Amazon, without giving their own assessment of the trend. Bolsonaro, a far-right, former army captain elected last year, has long been skeptical of environmental issues, and has repeatedly said the Amazon is a resource that belongs to Brazil, which Brazilians should choose how to administer. Increasingly, though, that point of view has angered foreign governments and trade partners, who want Brazil to do more to protect what they say is a crucial global asset for fighting climate change. Critics have been particularly alarmed by recent data from the internationally renowned National Institute for Space Research (INPE) that showed an 88% rise in deforestation in June.

LLANELWEDD, Wales (Reuters) -- Britain’s pro-European Union Liberal Democrats won a parliamentary seat from the governing Conservative Party, taking new Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s working majority to just one as he tries to steer the country through Brexit. Johnson is expected to face a showdown with lawmakers in the autumn over his vow to take Britain out of the European Union on Oct. 31 with or without a divorce deal. His government already relies on the support of a small Northern Irish party to pass legislation, with only a few rebels in his own Conservative Party needed to lose key votes. The Liberal Democrats, who are calling for a second referendum on EU membership, won the Welsh seat of Brecon and Radnorshire with a majority of 1,425 votes. “Boris Johnson’s shrinking majority makes it clear that he has no mandate to crash us out of the EU,” said Liberal Democrat leader Jo Swinson, whose party now have 13 seats in parliament. A narrow majority of voters in the area had supported leaving the EU in the 2016 referendum and Swinson said the result showed her party could win in Brexit-supporting areas.

TOKYO (Reuters) -- A visit on Friday by Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev to an island claimed by both Japan and Russia was extremely regrettable, Japan’s foreign ministry said, urging Moscow to take constructive steps to advance ties. In his first visit since 2015, Medvedev travelled to one of four Russian-held islands off Japan’s northern region of Hokkaido, known as Iturup in Russian and Etorofu in Japanese, despite protests from Tokyo ahead of the visit. Japan claims the islands, which it calls the Northern Territories. They were invaded by the then Soviet army in the waning days of World War Two. Visits like Medvedev’s are incompatible with Japan’s position on the Northern Territories and hurt the feelings of its people, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a statement. “We strongly urge the Russian side to take constructive measures to further advance Japan-Russia relations, including the issue of the conclusion of the peace treaty,” it added. Medvedev has visited the islands before, but this week’s trip could have impeded talks towards a peace treaty and joint economic activities there.