



MOSCOW (Dispatches) -- Two major world powers and strategic partners, Russia and China, say the United States' recent test launch of a nuclear-capable ballistic missile clearly indicates Washington's "malicious intention" for the demise of a landmark arms control treaty with Moscow. The Pentagon said on Thursday that it test launched a ground-launched, nuclear-capable missile from the Vandenberg Air Force Base near Los Angeles, California, and the missile flew for more than 500 kilometers. A spokesman for President Vladimir Putin said in a statement on Friday that the recent test launch by the Pentagon "clearly confirms" that Washington "has been making preparations for violating the INF Treaty." "This clearly confirms that the treaty was ruined at the initiative of the United States," Dmitry Peskov told reporters in Moscow. China also reacted to the Pentagon's launch of "a prototype conventionally-configured ground-launched ballistic missile," with the Foreign Ministry spokeswoman calling on the world to be "clear-eyed on the malicious intention and negative impact of the U.S. withdrawal and tests."

KATHMANDU (Reuters) -- Nepal wants to review a military deal allowing its citizens to be enlisted in the British army, before a planned recruitment of Nepali women in the Brigade of Gurkhas for the first time in two centuries, the Himalayan country's foreign minister said. It is not clear how many Gurkha women Britain plans to enlist, but the first Gurkha women could begin their training in the British army in 2020, according to British media. Britain has been enlisting Gurkhas, a tribe from Nepal's Himalayan foothills known for their fierce combat abilities, since 1815.

WELLINGTON (Reuters) -- New Zealand divers searched contaminated waters near the volcanic White Island for two remaining bodies on Saturday, as the death toll from an eruption rose to 15 people, the police said. Waters around the island were contaminated by the massive eruption of rocks, lava and chemicals on Monday, reducing visibility. "Divers have reported seeing a number of dead fish and eels washed ashore and floating in the water," police said in a statement. "Each time they surface, the divers are decontaminated using fresh water." The remains of six people were successfully recovered on Friday after a military team in gas masks and hazmat suits landed on the uninhabited island and removed the bodies in a high-risk operation. Police said they could not retrieve the remains of two more people, but spotted at least one body in the waters not too far from the island shoreline.

MELBOURNE (Reuters) -- The South Pacific island nation of Samoa on Saturday extended a state of emergency due to a measles outbreak which has killed 72 people, mostly infants, as New Zealand announced NZ\$1 million (\$640,700) to help combat measles in the Pacific. Samoa said a state of emergency will be extended to Dec. 29 with 5,154 cases of measles now reported since the outbreak started in October. Samoa has a population of only 200,000. Measles started appearing en masse earlier this year in the New Zealand city of Auckland, a hub for travel to and from small South Pacific islands. The majority of those who have died in Samoa due to the highly infectious disease have been aged four and under. The island nation had a far lower vaccination rate than its regional neighbors. Following a mandatory immunization campaign, the Samoan government said approximately 93% of all eligible people in Samoa have now been vaccinated against measles.

BANGKOK (Reuters) -- Several thousand people took part in Thailand's biggest protest since a 2014 coup on Saturday after authorities moved to ban a party that has rallied opposition to the government of former military ruler Prayuth Chan-ocha. The demonstration in Bangkok, called just a day earlier by Future Forward party leader Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, a 41-year-old billionaire, revived memories of the spasms of street protest that have roiled the Thai capital periodically during the past two decades of political turbulence. But there was no sign of any attempt to block the biggest demonstration since Prayuth seized power in 2014 on promises to end such unrest. "This is just the beginning," Thanathorn told the cheering crowd that spilled across walkways and stairways close to the MBK Centre mall, in the heart of Bangkok's shopping and business district. Thanathorn has emerged as the most outspoken opponent of the government headed by Prayuth, 65, since an election in March that the opposition said was manipulated to favor the army.

GENEVA/SANTIAGO (Reuters) -- Chilean police and soldiers used excessive or unnecessary force to quell recent demonstrations, committing serious human rights violations including unlawful killings and torture that should be prosecuted, the United Nations said. The UN human rights office said in a report that it had documented an "alarmingly high number" of 345 people suffering eye injuries after being hit by lead pellets fired from anti-riot shotguns by security forces. Twenty-six people were killed during nearly two months of protests that began in October over a rise in metro fares but quickly spiraled out of control. "We have found that the overall management of assemblies by the police was carried out in a fundamentally repressive manner," UN mission leader Inma Guerras-Delgado told a Geneva news briefing. "Human rights violations documented... include the excessive or unnecessary use of force that led to unlawful killings and injuries, arbitrary detentions, and torture and ill-treatment including sexual violence," she said.

U.S., UK Issue Travel Warnings Protests Against Citizenship Law Rage in India



Thousands of protesters have staged fresh demonstrations following several days of running battles with riot police.

NEW DELHI (AFP) -- Protests against a divisive new citizenship law raged Saturday as Washington and London issued travel warnings for northeast India following days of violent clashes that have killed two people so far.

Many in the far-flung, resource-rich region fear the new legislation will grant citizenship to large numbers of immigrants from neighboring Bangladesh, who they accuse of stealing jobs and diluting the region's cultural identity.

Hundreds of protesters rallied in the capital New Delhi Saturday, urging Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government to revoke the law that they said would "divide our secular country on religious lines".

Protests took a violent turn in West Bengal state, where a portion of a railway station complex was set on fire. Burning tires were thrown on rail tracks and key roads blocked by slogan-chanting protesters.

Tensions simmered in Guwahati in Assam state, the epicenter of the unrest, where medical staff said two people were shot dead and 26 hospitalized late Thursday after security forces fired live rounds.

Friday's funeral procession of 18-year-old Sam Stafford, who was killed in the firing, was attended by hundreds of angry and distraught mourners who shouted, "long live Assam".

"We were watching news all day on TV about the protests when my nephew left

home in the evening. We asked him not to go but he went with his friends," the student's aunt Julie Stafford told AFP.

Anticipating further unrest, authorities extended an internet ban across Assam till Monday. Most shops were shut and anxious residents stocked up supplies Saturday when the curfew was relaxed during the day.

The Citizenship Amendment Act allows for the fast-tracking of applications from religious minorities including Hindus and Sikhs from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh, but not Muslims.

Samujjal Bhattacharya from the All Assam Students Union, which has been at the forefront of the protests, told AFP the group would continue its fight against the new law "in the streets and in the court".

Modi and Japanese counterpart Shinzo Abe postponed a summit that reportedly was due to be held in Guwahati from Sunday, and the United States and Britain warned their nationals to "exercise caution" if travelling to the wider northeast region.

Islamic groups, the opposition and rights organizations say the law is a part of Modi's Hindu nationalist agenda to marginalize India's 200 million Muslims.

He denies this and says that Muslims from the three countries are not covered by the legislation because they have no need of India's protection.

Climate Talks Deadlocked Amid Serious Divisions



UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres speaks at COP25 in Madrid.

MADRID (AP) -- Countries remained deadlocked Saturday in talks over combating climate change as UN talks dragged on beyond the official deadline with no end in sight.

Chile's environment minister, Carolina Schmidt, who is chairing the two-week talks in Madrid, urged officials from almost 200 countries to recognize the "overall balance" of the latest draft agreements hammered out overnight.

"We must show the outside world that we deliver," she said, as officials prepared to hunker down for further negotiations.

But observers and environmental groups expressed outrage at the current proposals, saying they risked undoing or stalling on commitments made in the 2015 Paris climate accord.

"I've been attending these climate negotiations since they first started in 1991, but never have I seen the almost total disconnection we've seen here (...) in Madrid between what the science requires and the people of the world demand, and what the climate negotiators are delivering," said Alden Meyer, a climate policy specialist at the Union of Concerned Scientists.

Meyer said the current drafts didn't reflect urgent warnings from scientists that greenhouse gas emissions need to fall sharply, and soon, in order to keep

global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 Fahrenheit) by the end of the century. By most calculations, temperatures have already risen 1 degree Celsius since pre-industrial times and efforts so far put the world on course for a 3-4 degree Celsius rise by 2100, with potentially devastating consequences particularly for vulnerable developing countries.

"The planet is on fire and our window of escape is getting harder and harder to reach the longer we fail to act," Meyer said.

Growing concern about climate change has been reflected in mass protests staged around the world over the past year, often by young activists concerned about the future they and their children might face as the planet heats up.

Demonstrations took place inside and outside the venue of the talks in the Spanish capital, with Swedish teenage activist Greta Thunberg one of the most prominent voices calling for urgent action to curb emissions.

Some countries said it was time to heed those demands.

Among the countries pushing back against agreeing new measures to help poor countries and set new emissions cutting targets was the United States, which under President Donald Trump announced it is pulling out of the Paris accord.

North Korea Conducts 'Crucial Test' in Warning to U.S.



People watch a TV screen showing a file image of a ground test of North Korea's rocket engine during a news program at the Seoul Railway Station in Seoul, South Korea, Dec. 9, 2019.

SEOUL (AFP) -- North Korea has conducted another "crucial test" at its Sohae satellite launch site, state media reported Saturday, as nuclear negotiations between Pyongyang and Washington remain stalled with a deadline approaching.

The announcement came a day before U.S. Special Envoy on North Korea Stephen Biegun was set to arrive in Seoul for a three-day visit, and after the United States tested a medium-range ballistic missile over the Pacific Ocean on Thursday.

"Another crucial test was successfully conducted at the Sohae Satellite Launching Ground from 22:41 to 22:48 on December 13," a spokesman for the North's National Academy of Defense Science said in a statement

carried by the official KCNA news agency.

The "research successes" will be "applied to further bolstering up the reliable strategic nuclear deterrent" of North Korea, the spokesman added.

The statement did not provide further details on the test.

Soha, on North Korea's northwest coast, is a facility designed for putting satellites into orbit.

Frustrated by the lack of sanctions relief after three summits with President Donald Trump, North Korea has vowed an ominous "Christmas gift" if the U.S. does not come up with concessions by the end of the year.

Some analysts have suggested the North may be referring to an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM).

Earlier this month the North announced it conducted what it called a "very important test" at the same site in Sohae.

"It's very likely that the North is going to fire something on Christmas day, and they may call it a rocket system when it actually is an ICBM," Ahn Chan-il, a North Korean defector and researcher in Seoul, told AFP.

"The tests at Sohae can be seen as a form of preparation for the launch -- whatever it will be -- on December 25."

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un had agreed to shutter the Sohae site during a summit last year with South Korean President Moon Jae-in in Pyongyang as part of trust-building measures.

Kim has also held three meetings with U.S. President Donald Trump since June 2018.

But his nuclear negotiations with Washington have been deadlocked since a summit in Hanoi broke up in February, and Pyongyang has issued a series of increasingly assertive comments in recent weeks as its time limit approaches.

The North this week criticized Washington as "foolish" for convening a UN Security Council meeting over growing concern about short-range rockets fired from the isolated state.

By arranging the meeting, Washington "decisively helped us make a definite decision on what way to choose," North Korea's foreign ministry spokesman said.

Sudan Court Sentences Bashir to 2 Years in Prison



Sudan's former President Omar al-Bashir looks on as he is seen inside a cage at the courthouse where he is facing corruption charges, in Khartoum, August 31, 2019.

KHARTOUM (Reuters) -- A Sudanese court on Saturday convicted former president Omar al-Bashir on corruption charges and sentenced him to two years of detention in a reform facility, the first ruling against the ex-leader ousted by mass unrest.

The presiding judge said Bashir, 75, who was deposed by the military in April following months of street protests against his three-decade rule, was being sent to the reform facility, rather than a prison, on account of his age.

He also ordered the confiscation of millions of euros and Sudanese pounds found in Bashir's residence when he was toppled. The charges, which included possession of illicit foreign

currency, carried a maximum prison sentence of 10 years.

Bashir's prosecution is a test of how fast and how far military and civilian authorities now sharing power in Sudan will act to overturn his legacy.

Bashir is also wanted by the International Criminal Court, which issued arrest warrants against him in 2009 and 2010 on charges of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity in Sudan's restive Darfur region.

Dressed in traditional white robes and a turban, Bashir watched silently from inside a metal defendant's cage while the judge, Al-Sadiq Abdelrahman, read out the verdict.

"The convict, Omar al-Bashir, is con-

signed to a social reform facility for a period of two years...The sums of foreign and national currency that were seized are confiscated," Abdelrahman said.

The Sudanese Professionals Association, which spearheaded protests earlier this year, welcomed the verdict as a "political and moral condemnation" of Bashir and his regime, while noting that it was only one of several cases against the former president and his allies.

From early morning, troops and military vehicles were deployed in the center of the capital Khartoum, blocking access to the presidential palace and the Defense Ministry, and there was a heavy security presence at the court.

About 3,000 supporters of the ex-president's movement rallied in the center of the city.

Ahmed Ibrahim al-Tahir, Bashir's lead defense lawyer, said he would appeal. "The judge made the ruling based on political motives, but despite that we still have confidence in the Sudanese judiciary," Tahir told reporters.

Several other judicial cases have been launched in Sudan against Bashir. In May he was charged with incitement and involvement in the killing of protesters, and this week he was summoned for questioning over his role in the 1989 military coup that brought him to power.

Hong Kong Leader in China to Discuss Unrest

HONG KONG (Dispatches) -- Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam visited Beijing on Saturday for her first trip to the Chinese capital since her government was handed a crushing defeat in local elections last month, prompting speculation about changes to her leadership team.

During a four-day visit, Lam is due to discuss the political and economic situation in China-ruled Hong Kong with Chinese officials. She will meet Chinese President Xi Jinping on Monday.

Hong Kong has been convulsed by daily and sometimes violent protests for the last six months as demonstrations against a now-withdrawn extradition bill broadened into violent riots.

"Our sincerity to have dialogue with citizens has not changed," Lam said in a Facebook post on Saturday. She said her governing team would continue to pursue "different formats of dialogue to listen to citizens sincerely."

This week Lam said a cabinet reshuffle was not an "immediate task" and she would focus her efforts on restoring law and order to Hong Kong.

China has condemned the unrest and blamed foreign interference. It denies that it is meddling in Hong Kong's affairs. In an editorial this week, the official China Daily newspaper called on Hong Kong's government to uphold the rule of law.

Separately, three men were arrested on Saturday and charged with testing remote-controlled explosives, police said. Police also found body armor, shields and gas masks, they said.

Police also arrested five teenagers in connection with the murder of a 70-year-old man last month and on rioting charges, the government said. The man had been hit with bricks and later died in hospital, the government said in a statement.

Hong Kong has been governed under a "one-country, two-system" model since the city -- a former British colony -- was returned to China in 1997.

The Chinese government says the United States and Britain have been fanning the flames of unrest in Hong Kong by supporting the protesters.