

Koreas Reopen Hotline But Trump Makes Nuke Threat



A South Korean government official checks the direct communications hotline to talk with the North Korean side at the border village of Panmunjom in Paju, South Korea, Jan. 3, 2018.

SEOUL, South Korea (Dispatches) -- North Korean leader Kim Jong Un reopened a key cross-border communication channel with South Korea for the first time in nearly two years Wednesday as the rivals explored the possibility of sitting down

and talking after months of acrimony and fears of war.

Even among the sudden signs of easing animosity, however, President Donald Trump threatened Kim with nuclear war.

In his New Year's address Monday, Kim

said he was willing to send a delegation to next month's Winter Olympics in South Korea. But he also said he has a "nuclear button" on his desk and that all U.S. territory is within striking distance of his nuclear weapons, comments Trump latched onto Tuesday when he boasted of a bigger and more powerful "nuclear button" than Kim's.

The recent softening of contact between the rival Koreas may show a shared interest in improved ties. There have been repeated attempts in recent years by the rivals to talk, but even when they do meet, the efforts often end in recriminations and stalemate.

Kim's latest announcement, which was read by a senior Pyongyang official on state TV, followed a South Korean offer on Tuesday of high-level talks with North Korea to find ways to cooperate on next month's Winter Olympics in the South and discuss other inter-Korean issues.

Ri Son Gwon, chairman of the state-run Committee for the Peaceful Reunification, cited Kim as welcoming South Korea's overture and ordering officials to reopen a communication channel at the border village of Panmunjom. Ri also quoted Kim as ordering officials to promptly take substantial measures with South Korea out of a "sincere stand and honest attitude," according to the North's state TV and news agency.

South Korea quickly welcomed Kim's decision and later confirmed that the two Koreas began preliminary contacts on the channel.

Since taking office last May, South Korea's liberal President Moon Jae-in has pushed hard to improve ties and resume stalled cooperation projects with North Korea.

Relations between the Koreas soured under Moon's conservative predecessors, who responded to the North's expanding nuclear program with hardline measures. All major rapprochement projects were put on hold one by one, and the Panmunjom communication channel has been suspended since February 2016.

Moon still favors dialogue as a way to resolve the nuclear standoff but the Trump administration says all options are on the table, including military measures against the North. Moon has repeatedly said he opposes any war on the Korean Peninsula.

Storm Cuts Power to Hundreds of Thousands in Europe



Waves crashing against the seafront in Auderville, Normandy, as Storm Eleanor hits northern France on Jan 3, 2018.

GALWAY (Dispatches) -- Hundreds of thousands were without power on Wednesday after a new winter storm swept across France, Britain and Ireland, media reports said.

Storm Eleanor cut power to 200,000 households in northern France and was set to move to other regions throughout the day, electricity grid company Enedis said on Wednesday.

Households in the Normandy region were the worst hit, Enedis, a unit of state-controlled EDF said, while the area around Paris and north-eastern Picardie and Champagne-Ardenne were also among those affected.

The latest weather warning and strong winds come after winter storm Carmen battered western France on Jan 1, with some 40,000 households in the Brittany region temporarily losing power on Monday.

Ireland has also been battered by the storm.

Some 3,000 homes across Northern Ireland were without power, although electricity has been restored to 20,000 properties, the BBC reported.

Over in Ireland's west coast, the storm caused homes and businesses to suffer flood damage and 27,000 were still without electricity on Wednesday after

the storm brought heavy rain and winds of up to 155km per hour.

The storm hit Ireland's fourth largest city, Galway, particularly hard as high tides late on Tuesday forced road closures and wreaked havoc for shop owners.

Ireland's Electricity Supply Board (ESB) said at one stage on Tuesday 150,000 homes and business were without electricity.

"We're really hopeful, given that it's the last week of a lot of people's Christmas holidays, that we will have power back to pretty much everybody by tonight," Derek Hynes, Operations Manager for ESB, told national broadcaster RTE.

The weather service's second highest level of alert remained in place for the west and northwest of the country. Met Eireann said a combination of high tides and exceptionally high seas would result in coastal damage and further flooding.

In Britain, 2,700 homes were without power in England while only 460 were affected in Wales, the BBC reported.

It cited the British Met Office as saying that gusts reaching 161kmh had been recorded. A yellow warning for wind was in place in Wales, England, most of Northern Ireland and parts of southern Scotland.

Takfiri Bombing Kills 14 People at Nigeria Mosque

KANO, Nigeria (Dispatches) -- Fourteen worshippers were killed Wednesday when a suicide bomber attacked a mosque on Nigeria's border with Cameroon, civilian vigilantes told AFP.

The suspected Boko Haram extremist blew himself up amid worshippers inside the mosque in Gamboru around 5:00 am (0400 GMT), shortly before morning prayers.

"Fourteen bodies have been pulled out of the rubble," said Umar

Kachalla, a civilian militiaman, who said the mosque had been completely destroyed.

"Only the muezzin has survived and we believe more bodies are buried under the debris," said Kachalla. "The death toll may likely rise."

An hour earlier, a patrol of vigilantes spotted four suspected suicide bombers on the outskirts of the town and arrested one of them after a chase, said a second vigilante, Shehu Mada.

"Two of them turned back and fled

while the fourth disappeared into the darkness and we believe it was he who attacked the mosque," Mada said.

Boko Haram's eight-year insurgency against the government of Nigeria has spilled into neighboring Niger, Chad and Cameroon, killing around 20,000 people and displacing more than 2.6 million.

In August 2014, the Takfiri group seized Gamboru, a trading hub along with neighboring town of Ngala.

Nigerian troops retook both towns

One in 10 Youths in U.S. Homeless: Study



Homeless young adults walk through an alley on their way to a homeless shelter in Seattle's University district.

NEW YORK (Dispatches) -- One in 10 young adults aged 18 to 25 in the U.S. have slept on the streets, in shelters, run away, been kicked out of home, or couch-surfed in the past year, according to a national survey cited by the Guardian.

The study, Missed Opportunities: Youth Homelessness in America, published in the Journal of Adolescent Health, also found that at least one in 30 adolescents aged 13-17 experienced some form of homelessness unaccompanied by a parent or guardian over the same period.

Researchers with Chapin Hall, a youth policy center at the University of Chicago, polled more than 26,000 young people and their families over the past two years. Extrapolated nationally, the findings suggest nearly 3.5 million young adults and 660,000 adolescents had been homeless within the previous year.

The report aimed to challenge the notion that homelessness afflicts mostly older men. Key to understanding the statistics, the authors wrote, is that spot or "point in time" surveys had underestimated the issue because "young people often shift among temporary circumstances such as living on the streets and couch surfing in unstable locations".

The survey identified college students, graduates and employed young people who struggled to find a permanent place to stay. It also found that homelessness was no

less prevalent in rural areas than in urban locations, and that certain groups, including black and Hispanic as well as those who do not complete high school or are young parents, are at greater risk.

Many, of course, experience some conditions simultaneously. Young people with less than a high school diploma or GED were found to be 346% more likely to be homeless; black or African American people had an 83% greater risk; non-white Hispanics had a 33% higher risk; and unmarried parenting young people a 200% greater risk.

Young people reporting annual household income of less than \$24,000 had a 162% higher risk.

"Every day of housing instability and the associated stress represents a missed opportunity to support healthy development and transitions to productive adulthood," Chapin Hall researchers concluded.

"Our findings probably challenge the images of homelessness. Homelessness is young," Matthew Morton, a research fellow with the policy center, told the Washington Post. "It's more common than people expect and it's largely hidden."

He added: "Many young people are getting hammered in this economy ... and far too many youth have experienced trauma and lack stable family situations. You have a major affordable housing crisis."

Merkel Resumes Talks to End Political Stalemate

BERLIN (AFP) -- Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservatives resumed on Wednesday drawn-out talks with Germany's second biggest party aimed at ending months of post-election stalemate and forming a coalition government.

In the year's first such meeting, Merkel and her Bavarian ally Horst Seehofer were scheduled to talk with Martin Schulz, the leader of the center-left Social Democrats (SPD), from about 1400 GMT.

They hope to lay the groundwork for a week of exploratory talks from Sunday which -- if all sides can overcome major policy differences and lingering distrust -- could lead to a new "grand coalition" government by perhaps March or April.

However, the joyless effort to give a new lease of life to the alliance now running the top EU economy in a caretaker role was complicated this week when Seehofer's CSU presented a series of hardline positions that run counter to SPD demands.

The CSU -- which seeks to claw back votes from the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) ahead of Bavaria state elections later this year -- argued that Germany must, among other things, cut



Merkel has backed tighter German borders in a row with prospective coalition partner Martin Schulz.

state benefits for asylum seekers.

"Germany no longer wants to be a magnet for refugees from all over the world," said one of the CSU's chief negotiators, Alexander Dobrindt, referring to the influx of over one million asylum seekers since 2015.

The party, which regards itself as Germany's most conservative mainstream

force, also wants to boost defense spending and rejects an SPD demand to reform education policy.

Merkel, in office for 12 years, won September 24 elections but fell short of a clear majority and has since been struggling to form a new coalition.

In her New Year's Eve address Sunday, she urged all sides to work quickly for a stable new government, warning that "the world isn't waiting for Germany".

Her hopes to govern for a fourth term until 2021 were complicated when initial talks to build an alliance with two smaller parties -- the liberal Free Democrats and the left-leaning Greens -- collapsed in November.

She is now working for a re-run of her current left-right "grand coalition" with the SPD, but the traditional labor party has been reluctant to govern again in Merkel's shadow after a dismal election result.

Schulz, facing a skeptical party base, has only agreed to "open-ended" talks that could also lead to the toleration of a Merkel minority government -- an option which she however rejects as too unstable.



UNITED NATIONS (Dispatches) -- The United States is withholding \$255 million in aid from Pakistan because of its alleged failure to cooperate fully in America's fight against terrorism, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley said.

"The administration is withholding \$255 million in assistance to Pakistan. There are clear reasons for this. Pakistan has played a double game for years," she told reporters at the United Nations. "They work with us at times, and they also harbor the terrorists that attack our troops in Afghanistan. That game is not acceptable to this administration. We expect far more cooperation from Pakistan in the fight against terrorism."

LONDON (Dispatches) -- A former MI5 officer has claimed women do not "feel safe" on the streets of Germany as she blasted the introduction of "respect wristbands" and "safe zones".

Annie Machon, a former MI5 intelligence officer, has criticized German authorities for not doing enough on stopping sexual assaults taking place. In the lead up to New Year's Eve Cologne Mayor, Henriette Reker, launched a wristband campaign aimed at stopping sexual assault. Hundreds of wristbands with the word "respect" written on them were handed out across the city to members of the public. Slamming Angela Merkel's Germany for failing to do enough to tackle sexual assault Machon said: "Germany is one of the leading western liberal democracies in the world. Yet women cannot feel safe to go out in the streets to celebrate a public holiday."

LONDON (Reuters) -- Britain is interested in joining the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade bloc after it leaves the European Union, the Financial Times newspaper said.

The FT said that Britain had started informal talks about joining the bloc in a bid to boost post-Brexit exports. Although the United States pulled out of the talks to form the bloc nearly a year ago, other TPP countries have pledged to move forward with plans for a trade group. The TPP has so far involved only countries around the Pacific Rim such as Japan, Canada and Mexico. However, Junior Trade Minister Greg Hands said there was no geographical restriction that would prevent Britain's participation. EU rules state that Britain cannot agree new trade deals before it leaves the bloc in March 2019. The newspaper quoted an official from a TPP country as saying it was "way too soon" to discuss UK accession before a Brexit deal.

LIMA (AFP) -- A bus plunged over a seaside cliff in Peru, killing at least 48 people after a collision with a truck on a precarious stretch known as the "devil's curve," officials said.

The bus was travelling from Huacho, 130 kilometers (81 miles) north of the capital, to Lima with 55 passengers and two crew on board when it went off the road about midday. It plunged 100 meters (330 feet) and landed upside down on rocks at the edge of the sea. The incident "left at least 48 victims" dead, the statement posted on the Interior Ministry's website said. Efforts to recover bodies from the overturned vehicle were suspended at nightfall because the tide had risen and reached the bus, the police said. There were several survivors, although most on board the bus perished.

MANILA (Reuters) -- The Philippines has barred a branch of an American call center firm from expanding in the country following a pre-Christmas fire that killed dozens of its employees, a senior government official said on Wednesday.

Charito Plaza, director-general of the government's Philippine Economic Zone Authority (PEZA), said the agency had suspended the operations of American firm Research Now SSI, as well as the shopping mall hosting it, for failing to meet certain safety requirements since 2013. "They can operate again once they get a clearance from the Bureau of Fire and the local government," Plaza told Reuters in a text message. The authority's suspension took effect on Dec. 29, but it only covers SSI's branch in the southern city of Davao where the Dec. 23 blaze broke out at a furniture and fabric store on a lower floor of the New City Commercial Center (NCCC) mall before engulfing the call center's offices. Thirty-eight people were killed.

ANKARA (AFP) -- The foreign ministers of Germany and Turkey will meet this weekend as Ankara seeks to douse tensions with the EU that blighted 2017, Turkish officials said Wednesday.

German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel will host Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu in his home town of Goslar in Lower Saxony on Saturday, the officials said. The visit will represent the German leg of talks between the two men who met in November in Cavusoglu's home region of Antalya in southern Turkey. Cavusoglu said he would meet Gabriel on Jan. 6 at a briefing with Turkish reporters in Ankara quoted by state media. Relations between Turkey and Germany hit a nadir last year as Berlin strongly criticized the crackdown after the failed coup that left over 55,000 arrested and Ankara accused Berlin of meddling.