

North Korea Accuses U.S. of Aggravating Tensions



In this April 15, 2017, file photo, canisters containing missiles are displayed in Kim Il Sung Square in Pyongyang, North Korea.

SEOUL (Dispatches) -- North Korea on Saturday condemned the latest U.S. sanctions announced this week over the country's development of nuclear weapons which Pyongyang says are a deterrent against American aggression.

The U.S. sanctions are "a manifestation of heinous intention to throw a wet blanket over the inter-Korean exchange and cooperation and to aggravate the situation," an unnamed North Korean foreign ministry spokesman said in a report

said two China-based trading firms were involved in exporting millions of dollars worth of metals and other goods used in weapons production.

North Korea said the latest sanctions imposed are an attempt to sabotage a nascent process of dialog with South Korea.

North and South Korea have recently started face-to-face negotiations in a fragile effort to defuse long-running tensions. Pyongyang initiated that dialogue, putting the U.S. which has always been relying on a policy of pressure on the North, in an awkward position.

Washington responded with confusion, both playing down the North Korean overture to start dialogue with the South and then coming up with the new sanctions.

On Friday, Pentagon chief Jim Mattis said the breakthrough in talks between North and South Korea must not become a distraction from the aim of denuclearizing Pyongyang.

South Korea has welcomed the opening. South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha said in an address at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, that using military force to make North Koreans raising funds for the programs.

The U.S. Treasury imposed sanctions on nine entities, 16 people and six North Korean ships it accused of helping the weapons programs. It

by the Korean Central News Agency.

It also said the United States should stop such "anachronistic" policy towards North Korea.

The United States announced new sanctions on Wednesday aimed at stopping North Korea's nuclear weapons development and urged China and Russia to expel North Koreans raising funds for the programs.

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Haley Denies Rumors of Affair With Trump



U.S. President Donald Trump and U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley attend a UN meeting in New York on September 18, 2017.

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) -- U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley has responded to rumors that her swift ascension into President Donald Trump's inner circle was a pleasant perk of an affair with the former business mogul.

Haley, speaking to Politico's podcast Women Rule, said the rumors are "highly offensive" and "disgusting". They're not true, she said, and are simply the predictable result of a strong woman earning seats of power.

The rumors began after journalist Michael Wolff told television comedian Bill Maher that he was

"absolutely sure" that Trump was having an affair. Wolff wrote the recently released book Fire and Fury: A year inside the Trump White House, which details a turbulent first year in Trump's presidency.

Wolff, speaking to Maher, said that he was "absolutely sure" that the U.S. president is having an affair, but wasn't confident enough to include the allegation in his book.

"Now that I've told you, when you hit that paragraph, you're gonna say, 'Bingo,'" he said. That comment sparked a furious search by people online to try and identify the sentence he referenced.

They landed on this line from Wolff's book: "The president had been spending a notable amount of private time with Haley on Air Force One and was seen to be grooming her for a national political future."

"He says that I've been talking a lot with the president in the Oval about my political future. I've never talked once to the president about my future and I am never alone with him," Haley said on the podcast.

Haley was the governor of South Carolina during the 2016 campaign, and was reluctant to throw her support behind Trump's campaign. At one point, Haley said that she was "not a fan" of Trump, prompting the then-candidate to claim that her constituents were "embarrassed" by her.

The former governor was already seen as a rising star in the Republican Party when she later joined the Trump administration, and had been picked by the party to deliver the yearly rebuke to President Barack Obama in 2016.

Wolff's book revealed that Haley is "as ambitious as Lucifer" and many in Trump's inner circle worry that she could be the heir to the presidency.

Haley had decided by October 2017 that "Trump's tenure would last, at best, a single term", and thought she could be his heir apparent - something the president's inner circle has seen as a danger.

Sexual Harassment Up 80% in Germany Army

BERLIN (DW) -- Germany's armed forces and its civil administration and procurement authorities, the Bundeswehr, reported 14 cases of rape or attempted rape in 2017, a near three-fold increase on the previous year when five cases were reported, according to a report published in the Saturday newspapers by the Funke media group in Germany.

In 2016 there had been 128 initial reports of sexual offenses. In 2017 the number increased to 234.

According to the Funke reporting, the increase in cases reported represented heightened sensitivity to the issue, an increase in suspicion, earlier reporting, and the reopening of some older cases.

Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen said last year that she did not interpret the

figures as meaning that the volume of sexual assaults had gone up, but rather that there had been an increase in reporting incidents that might previously have gone unreported.

A spokesman was reported as saying initial reports covered a range of offenses from unwanted kissing to "touching a shoulder or thigh, to rape."

The case of a 29-year-old corporal who was alleged to have sexually assaulted two women soldiers at the Todendorf military training area northeast of Hamburg made headlines last November.

According to a report in Der Spiegel, a soldier filmed the attack but did not intervene. The prosecution is expected to complete its investigation by February, according to the Funke report.

It is the first time the Bundeswehr has

received complete figures on suspected cases, according to Funke reporting, which did not elaborate on how the military recorded statistics for previous years.

There are more than 60,000 soldiers in the German armed forces.

By comparison, Pentagon figures for the U.S. military reached a record in 2016 when 6,172 cases of sexual assault were reported compared to 6,082 the previous year. In 2012 some 3,604 cases were reported.

An anonymous survey in 2016 found 14,900 U.S. service members had experienced some kind of sexual assault, ranging from rape to groping.

However, 58% of the U.S. victims experienced reprisals or retaliation for reporting a sexual assault.

UK in Secret Talks to Extend Brexit Transition Period



British Prime Minister Theresa May has discreetly begun sounding out senior EU figures over whether transition could be extended.

LONDON (Dispatches) -- British officials are in discussions with Brussels about extending the Brexit transition period to almost three years, The Telegraph reported on Saturday.

The official government target for transition is "around two years" but many senior Whitehall officials remain privately concerned about the practicality of such a short transition, given potentially massive changes that would be required by a "hard" Brexit, the paper said.

According to The Telegraph, although it is not formally Government policy, Britain has discreetly begun sounding out senior EU figures over whether transition could be extended amid growing disarray within the cabinet over the ultimate terms of a long-term deal with the EU.

A major new poll has found that Britons favor a second vote by 16% over those who say the original ballot results in 2016 should remain unchallenged.

The poll conducted by ICM in conjunction with The Guardian newspaper found that after removing the quarter of those polled who have no view, 58% want to vote on the

exit deal once the final terms of the deal have been negotiated, versus 42% who oppose a second referendum.

If the vote were held today, in the midst of difficult negotiations and a British government riven by backstabbing and conflicting messages from members of Prime Minister Theresa May's troubled Cabinet, the study found that those wanting to remain would win by 51-49%.

While narrow, it's almost a mirror reversal from the original vote in June 2016 which ended with a stunning upset win by Brexiters, 52-48%. That said, The Guardian warns that polls before that ballot also indicated the "Remainers" would win and ultimately underestimated the numbers of those who would vote to leave the European Union.

There are a number of factors fueling the apparently changing domestic sentiment, in addition to the government's ham-handed and confusing handling of the negotiations so far. Economic news from the country has been largely and increasingly negative in the months since negotiations finally kicked off on June 19, 2017.

Deadly Mudflows Threaten Residents Near Volcano



Residents look on as Mount Mayon erupts.

LEGAZPI, Philippines (AFP) -- Millions of tons of ash and rock from an erupting Philippine volcano could bury nearby communities due to heavy rain, authorities said Saturday, as tens of thousands flee over fears of a deadly explosion.

The official Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology (Phivolcs) issued the warning as heavy rains lashed the area surrounding the Mayon volcano, which has been emitting flaming lava and giant clouds of superheated ash for the past week.

Rainwater could combine with the volcanic ash and rock to form deadly, fast-moving mudflows - called "lahars" - that could sweep away entire settlements, it said.

"The important thing is to move out in case of heavy rains... this is a precautionary measure," Phivolcs chief Renato Solidum told AFP.

The institute earlier said that 25 million cubic of ash and other volcanic material had recently been emitted by Mayon, settling on its slopes and elsewhere nearby.

It warned that this could result in lahars flowing into waterways, and called on officials to move residents near rivers to higher ground.

An explosion of the 2,460-meter Mayon in August 2006 did not directly kill anyone but four months later, a typhoon unleashed an avalanche of volcanic mud from its slopes that claimed 1,000 lives.

Phivolcs said Mayon had emitted fountains of lava on Friday but bad weather was preventing observation of the volcano's activity on Saturday.

Residents living by a river in Daraga town in Albay province expressed fear of a repeat of the 2006 incident.

"We are worried that lahar will flow again. We cannot sleep soundly at night. We sleep like chickens, waking up at the slightest rumble of the volcano," Virginia Tuscano, 47, told AFP as rain poured outside her home.

"Back in 2006 the lahar flow was so powerful it was like waves sweeping away even homes made of cement."

The mother-of-three said she had packed her bags and was ready to leave her home.

Observers saw a shroud of steam covering the entire mountain as heavy rain met the hot lava and volcanic material on Mayon's slopes.

Steam could also be seen rising from the volcano's crater as rainwater entered its interior.

Volcanic mudflows are a perennial problem during and after volcanic eruptions in the Philippines, which sits on the "Ring of Fire" - islands in the Pacific that were formed by volcanic activity.

The government has already evacuated more than 84,000 people from a "danger zone" stretching as far as nine kilometers around Mayon over fears of a possible deadly eruption.

News in Brief

DHAKA, Bangladesh (AP) -- Indonesian President Joko Widodo is in Bangladesh on a two-day visit to discuss bilateral issues and visit sprawling refugee camps for hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims who have fled Myanmar. Widodo arrived Saturday and is expected to fly Sunday to Cox's Bazar, the main town near where the camps are located. Widodo's visit is focused on bilateral cooperation but the Rohingya issue is expected to draw the most attention. Nearly 700,000 Rohingya have fled Myanmar since August, after Myanmar security forces began "clearance operations" in the wake of alleged attacks by Rohingya insurgents on police posts. The UN has described the campaign as ethnic cleansing. Bangladesh and Myanmar have signed a deal to repatriate the Rohingya, though international agencies say few are likely to return voluntarily due to safety concerns.

EDINBURGH (AFP) -- Britain's defense minister Gavin Williamson said a new radar off Scotland's Shetland Islands would help tackle the "severe and real" threat from Moscow. In a return to the Cold War days when Shetland had hosted an early warning radar, the new Royal Air Force facility is being built to track unidentified military or civilian aircraft. "We will always protect our skies from Russian aggression," Williamson said Friday, describing the radar as vital to British defenses. "Russia's actions are not limited to Europe's eastern borders - the threat to British livelihoods is severe and real," he added. The £10 million (\$14.1 million) radar on Unst, Britain's most northerly inhabited island, is due to be fully operational soon, the Ministry of Defense said. Once launched it will feed into the country's quick reaction alert system, which in the past has been used to scramble RAF jets to intercept Russian aircraft. On Jan. 15 two fighter jets were launched to monitor two Russian military aircraft, which the Ministry of Defense said did not respond to air traffic control authorities.

MOSCOW (Reuters) -- Newly-imposed U.S. sanctions against two Russian energy ministry officials are "unlawful" and Moscow will seek explanations from Washington, Russian Energy Minister Alexander Novak said on Saturday, according to local news agencies. The United States added Russian officials and energy firms to a sanctions blacklist on Friday, days before details of further possible penalties against Moscow are due to be released. One person added to the list was Russian Deputy Energy Minister Andrey Cherezov, who was put under sanctions by the European Union over his role in the delivery of turbines to Crimea last year.

SRINAGAR, India (AP) -- Indian soldiers opened fire on protesters in the disputed region of Kashmir Saturday, killing two young men and wounding several others, police said. The protesters threw stones at the soldiers as their convoy was passing through a village in southern Shopian, prompting them to open fire, police said. Police said several people were wounded, one critically, and taken to hospitals. Villagers put the number of wounded at nine. As the news of the killings spread, hundreds hit the streets chanting anti-India slogans and demanding an end to Indian rule. Rebel groups demand that Kashmir be united either under Pakistani rule or as an independent country, a view that is widespread even among civilians in the region. Tension in Shopian was already running high after government forces killed two local rebels and a teenage boy during a gun battle Wednesday. One of the slain rebels was from the village where Saturday's shooting took place.

ADDIS ABABA (AFP) -- Former Brazilian president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva said Saturday that efforts to block him from seeking re-election were only making him stronger, in a video address at the African Union summit. Lula travelled out at authorities who blocked him from travelling to the summit in Ethiopia where he was due to attend a meeting organized by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, a day after his graft conviction was upheld. The corruption ruling strikes a blow to 72-year-old Lula's hopes of running in this year's presidential election, in which he is regarded as a frontrunner. However analysts say he still has a shot at running and can file further appeals in higher courts. "They don't want me to be a candidate because the more they accuse me, the more they persecute me, the more I grow in public opinion polls," Lula told the meeting in Addis Ababa via a conference call.

TEGUCIGALPA (Reuters) -- Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernandez was set to be sworn in Saturday for an historic second term after prevailing last year in a bitterly disputed election that sparked deadly protests and international condemnation over alleged fraud. Hernandez appeared set to lose the Nov. 26 election until an abrupt halt in the vote count and a shift in the results, taking victory away from his center-left rival, Salvador Nasralla. The opposition cried foul, and more than 30 people were killed in protests that persisted through January in the impoverished Central American country. Nasralla has called for continued demonstrations. International observers said the election was marred by irregularities, and the Organization of American States called for a new presidential vote.