

North Korean Leader Calls for Intensified Drills to Simulate 'Real War'

SEOUL (Reuters) - North Korea's Kim Jong Un has ordered the military to intensify drills to deter and respond to a "real war" if necessary, state media said on Friday, after the leader oversaw a fire assault drill that it said proved the country's capabilities.

State media also showed Kim's young daughter sitting on a sofa as she watched the Thursday evening display, which was described as a success.

NK News, an online outlet that specializes in North Korea, said photos published in the state-run newspaper Rodong Sinmun on Friday showed the test involved six short-range ballistic missile launch vehicles, each capable of carrying four missiles. The launchers were lined up along a coastal forested area.

South Korea's military said it had detected the launch of "multiple rounds of SRBMs fired from the same region" from North Korea's West coast on Thursday evening at about 6.20pm (09:20 GMT).

North Korea's state news agency KCNA said a unit trained for "strike missions" fired a "powerful volley at the targeted waters" and demonstrated its capability to "counter an actual war".

"(Kim) stressed that the fire assault sub-units should be strictly prepared for the greatest perfection in carrying out the two strategic missions, that is, first to deter war and second to take the



A general view of fire assault drill at an undisclosed location in North Korea March 10, 2023 in this photo released by North Korea's Korean Central News Agency (KCNA).

initiative in war, by steadily intensifying various simulated drills for real war ...," KCNA said.

The latest launches come just days before the United States and South Korea are due to start large-scale joint military exercises known as Freedom Shield, which were last held in 2018. Pyongyang has long portrayed any drills involving the two countries' armed forces as rehearsals for invasion.

Analysts say Pyongyang is likely to intensify testing while the drills continue. Freedom Shield kicks off on March 13 and is expected to last for 10 days.

"This is likely only the beginning of

a series of provocative tests by North Korea," Leif-Eric Easley, a professor at Ewha University in Seoul said in emailed comments.

Kim's sister, Kim Yo Jong, warned earlier this week that any move to shoot down one of its test missiles would be considered a declaration of war.

North Korea conducted a record number of missile tests last year and has continued its activities into 2023 with test launches of an intercontinental ballistic missile, short-range missiles and a purported long-range cruise missile system in recent weeks.

It last carried out a nuclear test in September 2017.

French Pension Reform Strikes Continue to Disrupt Fuel Supplies, Power Output



French energy workers on strike gather in front of the French oil giant TotalEnergies refinery in Donges, near Saint-Nazaire, as part of the sixth day of nationwide strike and protests against French government's pension reform plan, France, March 7, 2023.

PARIS (Dispatches) - Workers striking in protest against proposed changes to France's pension system has continued to block fuel deliveries and reduce electricity production at several sites.

Power supply was reduced by 8.2 gigawatts (GW), or 13% of overall production, across some of the country's nuclear, thermal and hydropower sites due to the strike, EDF data showed.

France is not currently importing electricity, data from grid operator RTE showed, suggesting domestic supply is meeting demand.

TotalEnergies said there were again no fuel deliveries from its French

refineries due to the strike.

There were also no deliveries from ExxonMobil unit Esso's Fos-sur-Mer refinery in southern France, although operations had returned to normal at Port Jerome in the northwest, a union representative told Reuters.

About 7% of French refuelling stations lacked at least one product as of Wednesday, but "there is no supply problem for service stations and the situation is improving", said Olivier Gantois, president of the French Union for Petroleum, Energy and Mobility Industries UFIP.

Meanwhile, garbage piled up in Paris streets and fuel deliveries were blocked from refineries as workers

continued rolling strikes against pension reform but President Emmanuel Macron refused to meet with unions and said the reform must go ahead.

So far the impact has not been major, as cold weather has prevented the garbage in Paris and other cities from stinking, while there are no lines at gas stations yet as motorists and fuel station operators anticipated disruptions.

In a letter to unions, Macron refused to agree to their request for a meeting, saying that unions had had ample time to negotiate with the government over the past months and that now was the time for parliament to review the reform, whose key measure is a two-year extension of the retirement age to 64.

Ans also a nationwide strike by Belgium's public sector, was slowing rush-hour traffic and affecting everything from garbage collection to childcare.

Trade unions are protesting investment and employment cuts and demand that pension reforms be cut back.

"Not a single department escaped the cuts imposed by several governments. That's why we sound the alarm bell. Because everyone should have a strong public sector," the ACOD union said.

Train service was paralyzed in large parts of the nations and buses and subways were running on a limited timetable in and around Brussels.

Seven Dead, Several Injured in Germany's Hamburg Shooting

HAMBURG, Germany (AP) — A gunman stormed a service at his former Jehovah's Witnesses congregation in Hamburg, killing six people before taking his own life after police arrived, authorities in the German port city said Friday.

Police gave no motive for Thursday night's attack. But they acknowledged recently receiving an anonymous tip that claimed the man identified as the shooter showed anger toward Jehovah's Witnesses and might be psychologically unfit to own a gun.

Eight people were wounded, including a woman who was 28 weeks pregnant and lost the baby. Chancellor Olaf Scholz said the death toll could rise.

Officers apparently reached the hall, a boxy building next to an auto repair shop a few kilometers (miles) from downtown, while the attack was ongoing — and heard one more shot after they arrived, according to witnesses and authori-



A forensic expert stands beside police outside a Jehovah's Witness building in Hamburg, Germany Friday, March 10, 2023.

ties. They did not fire their weapons, but officials said their intervention likely prevented further loss of life.

Biden Proposes Largest Military Budget in U.S. History

Washington (The Hill) — U.S. President Biden proposed a more than 3 percent increase to the defense budget on Thursday, pushing up the Pentagon's spending amid heightened tensions with China and Russia.

The Biden administration's fiscal 2024 request for the Defense Department, released Thursday, comes in at \$842 billion, which is \$69 billion more than the \$773 billion sought in fiscal 2023. Congress eventually approved \$816 billion for the Pentagon in the last fiscal year, with all defense-related spending totaling \$857 billion.

This year's military request is unlikely to appease Republicans, who last year slammed Biden for proposing a defense budget they said failed to account for inflation and have raised concerns about "woke" Pentagon programs.

Considering inflation, this year's budget request is actually a small cut, according to Mark Cancian, a senior adviser with the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

"For defense, this is a pretty substantial step backwards," Cancian told The Hill. "I think the administration strategy is what they've done for the last couple of years, including the end of the Trump administration, which is project a flat top line and then have Congress bump it up."

When combined with further requests for nuclear weapons at the Department of Energy, expected military aid for Ukraine and anticipated congressional add-ons during the negotiation process, those additions could push total national defense spending well past \$900 billion in the next fiscal year.

The White House defense budget prioritizes spending to take on China, including in the Indo-Pacific. Biden proposes investing \$9.1 billion for the Pentagon's Pacific Deterrence Initiative, meant to maintain and bolster a U.S. military presence in the region. Another \$400 million will go toward a fund authorized by Congress to out-

compete Beijing in military, economic and technological sectors.

Biden is also requesting more than \$6 billion to support Ukraine, European ally nations and the NATO security alliance.

The request includes \$170 billion for Pentagon weapons procurement and \$145 billion for research and development — both record increases — as well as \$37.7 billion to continue modernizing the U.S. nuclear arsenal.

And Biden offers to boost U.S. troop and civilian workforce pay by 5.2 percent, in what would be the largest military pay increase since 2002 and the largest civilian pay increase in 40 years. The pay increase is also driven by inflation.

Critics on both the left and the right have raised concerns as the Pentagon's budget has steadily increased toward \$1 trillion.

But those who favor defense cuts have so far been drowned out by lawmakers who argue higher defense spending is needed to counter Russia's war in Ukraine, China's aggression in the South China Sea, and the nuclear ambitions of Iran and North Korea.

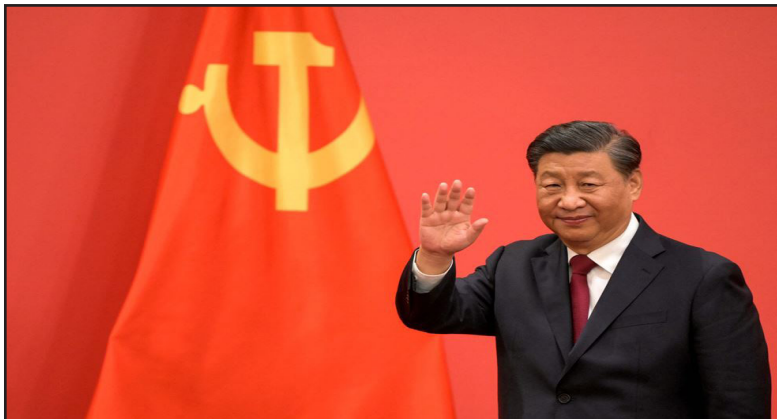
During Biden's first two years in the White House — when Democrats controlled both the House and Senate — Congress still boosted the Pentagon's request by tens of billions of dollars.

Biden on Thursday said his next budget "cements our commitment to confronting global challenges and keeping America safe."

"It outlines crucial investments to out-compete China globally and to continue support for Ukraine in the face of unprovoked Russian aggression," the president said in a message to Congress.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said the budget request "provides the resources necessary to address the pacing challenge" from China, improve modernization efforts and "ensure operational resiliency amidst our changing climate."

China's Parliament Backs Xi Jinping for Third Term as President



In this file photo taken on Oct. 23, 2022 China's President Xi Jinping waves during the introduction of members of the Chinese Communist Party's new Politburo Standing Committee, the nation's top decision-making body, to the media in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing.

BEIJING (Al-Jazeera) - Xi Jinping was handed an unprecedented third term as Chinese president on Friday, capping a rise that has seen him become the country's most powerful leader in generations.

Nearly 3,000 members of China's parliament, the National People's Congress (NPC), voted unanimously in the Great Hall of the People for Xi to be president in an election where there was no other candidate, CNA reported.

Xi, 69, also received unanimous votes for a third term as chairman of the country's Central Military Commission.

Zhao Leji, 66, was elected as the new parliament chair and Han Zheng, 68, as the new vice president. Both men were from Xi's previous team of party leaders at the Politburo Standing Committee.

The stage was set for Xi's new five-year run after a change to the constitution in 2018 that scrapped term limits.

Changes to the country's leadership take place every five years and usually closely mirror the reshuffle announced at the party congress.

Over the next two days, officials

approved by Xi are set to be appointed or elected to fill top positions in the cabinet, including premier-in-waiting Li Qiang, who is expected to be named to China's No 2 post, putting him in charge of managing the world's second-largest economy.

Xi chatted casually with Li, who was seated to his left, as delegates deposited voting slips into electronic ballot boxes.

The election of state leaders by the parliament comes three months after tough COVID-19 policies were dismantled and a new wave of infections caused by the highly transmissible Omicron strain rippled across the country. Except for dozens of top leaders, all other delegates and staff wore masks.

Xi will make a speech on Monday before the annual parliamentary session closes, as China faces multiple challenges including an economy hobbled by three years of COVID-19 curbs and worsening relations with the West.

Earlier this week, Xi blamed the United States and the West for the difficulties faced by China's economy, remarks unusual from him for being directly at Washington.

News in Brief

MEXICO CITY (Reuters) - Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador has rebuked calls from some U.S. lawmakers advocating military action in Mexico against drug cartels, describing the proposals as threats to Mexican sovereignty. "We are not going to permit any foreign government to intervene in our territory, much less that a government's armed forces intervene," Lopez Obrador said during a regular news conference. The kidnapping of four Americans - two of whom were killed - in a northern border state intensified calls from Republican lawmakers in Washington to take a tougher line on organized crime.

WASHINGTON (AP) — Reported sexual assaults at U.S. military academies shot up during the 2021-22 school year, and one in five female students told an anonymous survey that they had experienced unwanted sexual contact, The Associated Press has learned. U.S. officials said student-reported assaults at the Army, Navy and Air Force academies jumped 18% overall compared with the previous year. The increase was driven largely by the Navy, which had nearly double the number of reported assaults in 2022, compared with 2021. It's unclear whether the phasing out of COVID-19-related restrictions contributed to the increase, including at the U.S. Naval Academy, which is directly adjacent to bars in downtown Annapolis, Maryland.

WASHINGTON (AP) — Australia will purchase U.S.-manufactured, nuclear-powered attack submarines to modernize its fleet, a European official and two people familiar with the matter said Thursday. The purchase agreement for up to five Virginia-class submarines will be announced Monday when President Joe Biden, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and U.K. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak meet in San Diego for talks on the 18-month-old nuclear partnership known by the acronym AUKUS. The people spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the matter ahead of the announcement.

KUALA LUMPUR (Reuters) - Former Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin was charged on Friday with abuse of power and money laundering over projects launched under his premiership, accusations that he said were politically motivated. The charges come just three months after Muhyiddin lost a closely fought and divisive general election to Anwar Ibrahim, and are likely to increase political tension in Malaysia ahead of regional polls this year. Muhyiddin, who led the country for 17 months between 2020 and 2021, becomes the second Malaysian leader to be charged with crimes after losing power. At a Kuala Lumpur sessions court, the prosecution alleged that Muhyiddin abused his position as prime minister to receive bribes of 232.5 million ringgit (\$51.44 million) in a bank account belonging to his party, Bersatu. The former premier and opposition leader was charged with four counts of abuse of power and two counts of money laundering.

PARIS (AFP) - Nearly 130,000 people in the Greater Horn of Africa are "staring death in the eyes" from catastrophic hunger, the World Health Organization (WHO) warned Friday. Some 48 million people in the Greater Horn -- Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Uganda -- are facing crisis levels of food insecurity, the WHO said. That means households skipping meals and depleting savings and assets in order to eat. Of those, six million are facing emergency levels of food insecurity, and 129,000 are at the worst level -- catastrophe.