

North Korean Leader in Russia to 'Cooperate on Sensitive Areas'



A view shows North Korean leader Kim Jong Un disembarking from his train and being greeted by Russian officials in Khasan in the Primorsky region, Russia, in this still image from video published September 12, 2023.

MOSCOW (AFP) -- North Korean leader Kim Jong Un arrived in Russia Tuesday ahead of a meeting with President Vladimir Putin that the United States has warned could see an arms deal to support Moscow's assault on Ukraine.

Making a rare foreign trip and his first since the pandemic, Kim waved from the doorway of his heavily armored private train as it departed Pyongyang on Sunday evening, according to images published by North Korean state media.

Kim will meet Putin at an unspecified location in Russia's Far East region later this week, according to Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov.

Putin is currently attending the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok, the Far East city closest to the North Korean border, though there has been no indication that the pair would hold their talks there.

Reporters granted access to the Russian leader at the forum refrained from asking Putin details of the visit but he told journalists he would soon visit the Vostochny Cosmodrome, a Russian spaceport some 1,000 kilometers (620 miles) from Vladivostok.

"I've got my program there, and when I get there you'll know," he said, according to Russian news agencies.

Experts say Moscow will likely seek artillery shells and antitank missiles from

North Korea, which wants advanced satellite and nuclear-powered submarine technology in return.

The White House warned last week that North Korea would "pay a price" if it supplies Russia with weaponry for the conflict in Ukraine.

Defying the warnings, Kim left North Korea for Russia on Sunday, according to the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA).

He was accompanied by top North Korean military officials, including officials in charge of weapons production and space technology, it added.

Peskov said the two leaders would "cooperate on sensitive areas that should not be the subject of public disclosure and announcements".

On Tuesday, Russian state news agency Ria Novosti said Kim had crossed the border, with images showing the train with dark green carriages being pulled along a track by a Russian Railways locomotive.

Kim is travelling to Russia with his top military officials including Korean People's Army Marshal Pak Jong Chon and Munitions Industry Department Director Jo Chun Ryong, analysts said.

This indicates a Putin-Kim summit "is likely to heavily focus on Russia and North Korea's possible military cooperation," Yang Moo-jin, president of the University of North Korean Studies in Seoul, told AFP.

Moscow sent Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu to Pyongyang in July. He has recently mooted bilateral joint naval drills.

Agency: U.S. Weather Disasters Surge to Record High



Ryan Orosco, of Brentwood, carries his son Johnny, 7, on his back while his wife Amanda Orosco waits at the front porch to be rescued from their flooded home on Bixler Road in Brentwood, Calif., Jan. 16, 2023.

WASHINGTON (AP) -- The deadly firestorm in Hawaii and Hurricane Idalia's watery storm surge helped push the United States to a record for the number of weather disasters that cost \$1 billion or more. And there's still four months to go on what's looking more like a calendar of calamities.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration announced Monday that there have been 23 weather extreme events in America that cost at least \$1 billion this year through August, eclipsing the year-long record total of 22 set in 2020. So far this year's disasters have cost more than \$57.6 billion and claimed at least 253 lives.

And NOAA's count doesn't yet include Tropical Storm Hilary's damages in hitting California and a deep drought that has struck the South and Midwest because those costs are still to be totaled, said Adam Smith, the NOAA applied climatologist and economist who tracks the billion-dollar disasters.

"We're seeing the fingerprints of climate change all over our nation," Smith said in an interview Monday. "I would not expect things to slow down anytime soon."

NOAA has been tracking billion-dollar weather disasters in the United States since 1980 and adjusts damage costs for inflation. What's happening reflects a rise in the num-

ber of disasters and more areas being built in risk-prone locations, Smith said.

"Exposure plus vulnerability plus climate change is supercharging more of these into billion-dollar disasters," Smith said.

NOAA added eight new billion-dollar disasters to the list since its last update a month ago. In addition to Idalia and the Hawaiian firestorm that killed at least 115 people, NOAA newly listed an Aug. 11 Minnesota hailstorm; severe storms in the Northeast in early August; severe storms in Nebraska, Missouri, Illinois, Indiana and Wisconsin in late July; mid-July hail and severe storms in Michigan, Wisconsin, Ohio, Tennessee and Georgia; deadly flooding in the Northeast and Pennsylvania in the second week of July; and a late June outbreak of severe storms in Missouri, Illinois and Indiana.

"This year a lot of the action has been across the center states, north central, south and southeastern states," Smith said.

The increase in weather disasters is consistent with what climate scientists have long been saying, along with a possible boost from a natural El Nino, University of Arizona climate scientist Katharine Jacobs said.

Stanford University climate scientist Chris Field called the trend in billion-dollar disasters "very troubling."

Hopes Dim for Quake Survivors in Morocco as Death Toll Rises



A villager looks at destroyed houses in Douzrou on September 12, 2023, following the 6.8-magnitude earthquake.

MARRAKESH, Morocco (AFP) -- Hopes dimmed on Tuesday in Morocco's search for survivors, four days after a powerful earthquake killed more than 2,900 people, most of them in remote villages of the High Atlas Mountains.

Search-and-rescue teams from the kingdom and from abroad kept digging through the rubble of broken mud-brick homes, hoping for signs of life in a race against time following the 6.8-magnitude quake late Friday.

The Red Cross appealed for more than \$100 million in aid to meet the "most pressing needs" in the north African country, including water, shelter, health and sanitation services.

"We need to make sure we avoid a second wave of disaster," said Caroline Holt, global director of operations at the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

In the tourist hub of Marrakesh, whose UNESCO-listed historic centre suffered cracks and other major damage, many families still slept out in the open, huddled in blankets on public squares for fear of aftershocks.

But the need was most desperate in remote and poor mountain villages, many only reachable via winding dirt roads, where traditional adobe homes crumbled to rubble and dust and inhabitants have searched by hand for missing relatives.

About 100 people died in the mountain

village of Douzrou, 80 kilometers southwest of Marrakech, where survivors now live in makeshift shelters, away from their destroyed or badly damaged homes.

"We want to be relocated as soon as possible. We lost everything, even our livestock, but no one came to see us," said Hossine Benhammou, 61, who lost nine family members in the earthquake.

"The weather conditions here are very harsh," said Ismail Oubella, 36, who lost three children, his pregnant wife and his mother. "We fear the worst with the coming winter."

Another resident, Lahcen Ouhmane, 68, said that "we are afraid of the rains that could cut the unpaved road that leads to our village. We risk starving".

Rescuers, aid trucks and private volunteers kept travelling to stricken villages in the barren foothills of the High Atlas, many accessible only via roads affected by rockfalls.

Many Moroccan citizens have rushed to help quake victims with food, water, blankets and other aid or by donating blood to help treat the injured, an effort joined by the national football team.

The quake was Morocco's strongest on record and the deadliest to hit the country since a 1960 earthquake destroyed Agadir on the Atlantic coast, killing between 12,000 and 15,000 people.

Overall, at least 2,901 people have died and 5,530 injured in the latest tragedy, according to the latest official toll issued Tuesday.

Ministry: China's Economy Has Not Collapsed



BEIJING (Dispatches) -- China's economy is resilient and has not collapsed, the Chinese foreign ministry said on Tuesday, rejecting claims from the West that its economy is faltering and could cause wider problems.

Officials from countries including Australia and the United States have publicly raised concerns about the world's second-largest economy.

U.S. President Joe Biden called China's economic situation a "crisis" while Australian Treasurer Jim Chalmers said a slowing Chinese economy could in turn weigh on Australia's.

"It seems that there will be various theories of China's collapse every once in a while," Mao Ning, a ministry spokesperson, told a regular news briefing.

"The fact is that China's economy has not collapsed," Mao added, without naming Biden or Chalmers.

She said China's economy had great potential and that the fundamentals of long-term improvement had not changed.

"We are confident and capable of promoting sustained and healthy economic development," Mao added.

China's economic recovery following three years' harsh COVID-19 restrictions has lost momentum after a brisk start in the first quarter, gripped by weak consumer spending and a deepening property downturn.

Analysts polled by Reuters said the economy would grow 5.0% this year, lower than 5.5% forecast in a July survey.

The world economy has been recovering sluggishly and the external environment has been severe and complex since the beginning of this year, however, China's economy has continued to revive and rebound, Mao said.

China will keep advancing high-level opening up, strengthen mutually beneficial cooperation with other countries and share its dividends of development, Mao said, adding China's development will bring more opportunities to its Asian neighbors and the world.

UN: Hundreds Killed in Ethnic Attacks in West Darfur

GENEVA (Reuters) -- Ethnically motivated attacks perpetrated by Sudan's paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and allied militia have killed hundreds in the West Darfur region, the United Nations human rights chief said on Tuesday.

Bloodshed, violence and displacement have escalated since fighting between the Sudanese army and RSF erupted in April, driving the country to the brink of civil war.

"In West Darfur, ethnically motivated attacks perpetrated by the RSF and allied Arab militia have resulted in the deaths of hundreds of non-Arab civilians primarily from Masalit communities," Volker Turk, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, told the Human Rights Council in Geneva.

"Such developments echo a horrific past that must not be repeated," he said, alluding to the killing of as many as 300,000 people and displacement of over 2 million in conflict in Darfur between 2003 and 2008.

Turk said the latest attacks had occurred mainly in El Geneina, capital of West Darfur and Sudan's westernmost city, but also in at least eight other locations. He said the RSF controls all but two localities in West Darfur.

The RSF has denied accusations by conflict monitors, rights groups and witnesses that it is behind attacks on civilians, while saying any of its soldiers found to be involved would be brought to justice.

The reported attacks against the non-Arab Masalit people, the largest community in El Geneina, have sent tens of thousands of people fleeing across the nearby border into Chad.

Turk there were also "worrying signs" of the involvement of militia often affiliated along tribal or ethnic lines.

"Mobilization campaigns by the Sudanese armed forces pose a real risk of sparking intercommunal tension and triggering even further conflict between communities," he said.

Turk also highlighted what he called an "ongoing epidemic of conflict-related sexual violence", saying his office had received credible reports of 45 incidents, involving at least 95 victims, including 75 women, one man and 19 children.

"This is likely to be the tip of the iceberg... The majority of perpetrators -- around 78% - have been men in RSF uniform or armed men affiliated with the RSF."

The UN refugee agency said last week it expected more than 1.8 million people from Sudan to flee to five neighboring countries by the end of the year.

The war in Sudan began four years after a popular uprising ousted President Omar al-Bashir. Tensions between the army and RSF, which jointly staged a coup in 2021, erupted into fighting over a plan to integrate their forces as part of a transition to civilian rule. While several countries have launched mediation efforts, none has succeeded in bringing a halt to the fighting.



KHANKANDI, Azerbaijan (Dispatches) -- Russian humanitarian aid arrived Tuesday in the breakaway region of Karabakh via Azerbaijan's territory, separatist authorities in the enclave said. The sole road linking the mountainous territory with Armenia, the Lachin corridor, is policed by Russian peacekeepers as part of a ceasefire agreement Moscow brokered between the ex-Soviet Caucasus nations in 2020. "The Russian Red Cross's humanitarian aid was delivered" to Khankandi on Tuesday, the rebel regime's information center said. Azerbaijan's Red Crescent confirmed the report, saying that the truck belonging to Russia's Red Cross arrived in the city of Khankandi via the Aghdam road which links the region with the rest of Azerbaijan. Earlier in September, Azerbaijan agreed to simultaneously reopen, for humanitarian supplies, both the Lachin corridor and the Aghdam road, but said Armenian separatists rejected the proposal. Armenia and Azerbaijan have fought two wars for control of Karabakh and the last fighting in 2020 ended with a Russian-brokered ceasefire that saw Armenia cede swathes of the Azerbaijani territory it had occupied for decades.

LONDON, Sept 12 (Reuters) -- Britain's BAE Systems, Japan's Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, and Italy's Leonardo have agreed the next steps to deliver the concept phase of a next-generation combat aircraft, BAE Systems said on Tuesday. The three nations agreed in December 2022 to collaborate to build an advanced front-line fighter to enter service around the middle of the next decade. The new Global Combat Air Program (GCAP) agreement will support discussions to set out working arrangements and capability requirements for the aircraft, BAE said. GCAP is expected to cost tens of billions of dollars but the parties have not yet finalized how the budget will be split. Britain's defense ministry had committed 2 billion pounds to the project, formerly known as Tempest, before Japan and Italy joined.

TAIPEI (AFP) -- China's most modern aircraft carrier is expected to be commissioned by 2025, the Taiwan government said Tuesday, describing it as a major threat to be dealt with in the future. China views self-ruled Taiwan as part of its territory and has vowed to bring the self-ruled island under its control. The Fujian, Beijing's third and biggest carrier, was launched last year but authorities have not said when it will enter service. Taiwan's defense ministry said in a biennial report released Tuesday the Fujian is expected to be commissioned "after its completion of sea trials by 2025". The Fujian is China's "first catapult aircraft carrier". Its other carriers, the Liaoning and the Shandong, use a ski-jump-style ramp for takeoffs, said Huang Wen-chi, assistant deputy chief of Taiwan's General Staff for Intelligence. The building of the Fujian shows that China "is preparing for deep-sea operations", said Huang.

GENEVA (AFP) -- The Mexico-United States border was the world's most dangerous land route for migrants in 2022, with nearly 700 dying or going missing, the UN migration agency said on Tuesday. "The International Organization for Migration (IOM) documented 686 deaths and disappearances of migrants on the U.S.-Mexico border in 2022, making it the deadliest land route for migrants worldwide on record," it said. "The figure represents nearly half of the 1,457 migrant deaths and disappearances recorded throughout the Americas in 2022, the deadliest year on record since IOM's Missing Migrants Project (MMP) began in 2014." Nearly half (307) of the deaths on the United States-Mexico border were linked to the hazardous crossing of the Sonoran and Chihuahuan Deserts, far more than other desert regions where irregular migration is prevalent.

TOKYO (Reuters) -- Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida is considering retaining Finance Minister Shunichi Suzuki and Industry Minister Yasutoshi Nishimura, Kyodo news agency reported on the eve of an expected cabinet reshuffle, making major changes in the ministerial line-up unlikely. Recent opinion polls show Kishida, who became prime minister less than two years ago, scoring lower approval than disapproval ratings, and he has said he plans to reshuffle his cabinet and make changes in the leadership of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) as early as Wednesday. Earlier, the Yomiuri Shimbun newspaper reported that Kishida had decided to keep Hirokazu Matsuno in his current post as chief cabinet secretary, a key position that coordinates policy among ministries and acts as the top government spokesman. Shinzo Abe and Yoshihide Suga, two prime ministers before Kishida, both served as chief cabinet secretary before becoming premier.

SINGAPORE (AFP) -- A Malaysian court upheld on Tuesday the acquittal of jailed former prime minister Najib Razak on an audit tampering charge in the investigation into corruption at the IMDB state wealth fund. Najib is serving a 12-year prison term on other graft charges related to the 1 Malaysia Development Berhad financial scandal. The plundering of the fund led to investigations around the world, including in the United States, Switzerland and Singapore, into the use of their financial systems to launder money. But Malaysia's Court of Appeal struck out the appeal by state prosecutors against the acquittal of the audit tampering charge after prosecutors did not submit documents in time, Najib's lawyer Mohamed Shafie Abdullah told AFP.