

North Korea Fires Missile as Blinken Visits South Korea



A man walks past a TV broadcasting a news report on North Korea firing a ballistic missile out to sea off its east coast in Seoul, Jan. 6, 2025.

SEOUL (AFP) -- North Korea on Monday fired a missile as U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited South Korea, where he warned Pyongyang was working ever closer with Russia on advanced space technology.

Blinken visited as investigators were trying to arrest conservative President Yoon Suk Yeol, who has entrenched himself in his residence after being impeached for a failed attempt to impose martial law.

In a reminder of domestic challenges that go beyond foreign politics, North Korea on Monday fired a ballistic missile to sea as Blinken was holding meetings in Seoul, pushing him to rebuke Pyongyang and its ally Russia.

The outgoing diplomat took aim at Russia, saying Moscow was expand-

ing space cooperation with Pyongyang.

"The DPRK is already receiving Russian military equipment and training. Now we have reason to believe that Moscow intends to share advanced space and satellite technology with Pyongyang," he told the news conference.

After North Korea's missile flew around 1,100 kilometers (680 miles) before falling into the sea, Seoul said it had "strengthened surveillance and vigilance" for more launches.

The test comes two weeks before the inauguration of U.S. President-elect Donald Trump, who in his last term sought to woo North Korea with a unique personal diplomacy.

Until briefly imposing martial law on December 3, Yoon had been a darling of President Joe Biden's admin-

istration for his pro-U.S. policies on the global stage.

Yoon delighted the United States by seeking to turn the page on decades of friction with Japan, a fellow U.S. ally that is also home to thousands of U.S. troops.

Yoon joined Biden and Japan's then prime minister Fumio Kishida in 2023 for a landmark three-way summit at the Camp David presidential retreat that included a promise to step up intelligence cooperation on North Korea.

South Korea's progressive opposition, which has made Yoon's life miserable from parliament and is increasingly ascendant since the president's power grab, historically has taken a harder line on Japan.

Opposition leader Lee Jae-myung -- who himself faces election disqualification in a court case -- also favors more diplomatic outreach with North Korea than the hawkish Yoon.

The turmoil and lack of a clear leader in Asia's fourth-largest economy comes just as the U.S. is in the midst of its own political transition.

While Biden has focused on nurturing U.S. alliances, Trump, who takes over on January 20, has been dismissive of what he sees as unfair commitments by Washington.

Trump said during his latest presidential run that if he were in power he would have strong-armed South Korea into paying \$10 billion a year for the U.S. troop presence, nearly 10 times what it contributes now.

Norway PM: Musk's Involvement in Global Politics Worrying



Elon Musk's frequent appearances alongside Donald Trump have earned him the satirical nickname "first buddy".

OSLO (Reuters) -- Norway's Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre said on Monday that he found it worrying that billionaire Elon Musk was involving himself in the political issues of countries outside of the United States.

Musk, a close ally of U.S. President-elect Donald Trump, last month endorsed a German anti-immigration, anti-Islamic political party ahead of that country's national elections in February, and recently made remarks on British politics.

"I find it worrying that a man with enormous access to social media and huge economic resources

involves himself so directly in the internal affairs of other countries," Støre told Norwegian public broadcaster NRK.

If Musk were to involve himself in Norwegian politics, the country's politicians should collectively distance themselves from such efforts, Støre said.

Musk, the world's richest person, spent more than \$250 million to help Trump get elected and has been tasked by Trump to prune the federal budget as a special adviser.

The German government last week accused Musk, who owns social media platform X and is CEO of Tesla

and SpaceX, of trying to influence Germany's upcoming election with a guest opinion piece for the Welt am Sonntag newspaper.

German Vice Chancellor Robert Habeck said Musk's support for Germany's far-right Alternative for Germany was a "logical and systematic" play by the billionaire for a weak Europe that will not be able to regulate as strongly.

On Sunday, Musk said Nigel Farage should quit as leader of Britain's right-wing Reform UK party in an abrupt withdrawal of support by the U.S. billionaire for the Brexit campaigner who is trying to shake up the British political establishment again.

"The Reform Party needs a new leader. Farage doesn't have what it takes," Musk said on his social media platform X, a few hours after Farage described him as a friend who made Reform look "cool".

Musk had seemingly backed Farage and posed for a photograph with him last month.

Reform won 4.1 million votes or 14% of the total and five seats in parliament in last July's national election.

Farage has previously said he is in negotiations with Musk about the billionaire donating to Reform to help it challenge the dominant Labor and Conservative parties.

Aliyev: Russia 'Guilty' Over Downing of Azerbaijani Plane

BAKU (AFP) -- Azerbaijan's president said on Monday that Russia was "guilty" over the downing of an airline last month that Baku says was shot by Russian air defenses.

An Azerbaijan Airlines Embraer 190 jet crash-landed in Kazakhstan on December 25, killing 38 of the 67 people on board, after being diverted from a scheduled landing in the southern Russian city of Grozny.

Moscow has admitted its air defenses were operational in the area at the time, which it said was under attack from Ukrainian drones.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has apologized that the "incident" occurred in his country's air space but has not responded to claims the plane was hit by Russian weapons.

"The guilt for the death of Azerbaijani

citizens lies with representatives of the Russian Federation," Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev said on Monday, according to a statement published by his office.

Aliyev was meeting surviving crew and family members of crew who died in the incident.

The Azerbaijani leader, who is close to Putin, has issued rare fierce criticism of Moscow over the crash, demanding an apology, admission of guilt and the punishment of those found responsible for the "criminal" shooting of the plane.

On Monday he said Russia's "concealment" of the causes and "delusional versions" being put forward "cause us justifiable anger".

Initial statements by Russia's air transport agency that the plane had been forced to divert after a bird strike have

triggered fury in Baku.

Aliyev said air defense measures for Grozny -- the capital of Russia's southern Chechnya region, where the plane was set to land -- were only announced after the plane had been "shot from the ground".

"If there was a danger to Russian airspace, then the captain of the plane should have been informed straight away," Aliyev said.

He also questioned why the plane was sent hundreds of kilometers (miles) across the Caspian Sea to the Kazakh city of Aktau for an emergency landing.

"Why it was directed to Aktau, we have no information," Aliyev said.

Azerbaijan says preliminary results of its investigation show the plane was hit accidentally by a Russian air defense missile.

China's FM Begins Africa Visit Amid West's Waning Influence



BEIJING (Reuters) -- China's top diplomat began his annual New Year tour of Africa, maintaining a 35-year-long tradition, to quietly advance Beijing's already sizeable influence across the resource-rich continent as Europe's presence wanes and America's wavers.

While global capitals and investors brace for the return of U.S. President-elect Donald Trump to the White House, and wars in Ukraine and the Middle East and domestic politics keep German and French ministers occupied, Foreign Minister Wang Yi being in Namibia, the Republic of Congo, Chad and Nigeria highlights the consistency of China's engagement with Africa, analysts say.

Wang's visit through to Saturday also comes as the world's No.2 economy ramps up its financial support for the debt-laden continent and looks to strike more critical minerals deals and find markets to absorb its exports.

"The decision on which countries to go to each year rarely follows any external logic," said Eric Orlander, co-founder of the China-Glob South Project. "It resonates in Africa as a reminder of China's consistent commitment to the continent, in contrast to the approaches of the U.S., United Kingdom and European Union."

Mao Ning, Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson, announced the visit at a news conference on Friday, saying it

aimed to deepen practical cooperation across the board for sustained and substantive growth of China-Africa relations.

As China's economy slows, Africa offers a much-needed avenue for its state-owned infrastructure firms struggling for projects as indebted local governments hold off on spending, and a market for its electric vehicles and solar panels, areas where the U.S. and EU say it has overcapacity.

Africa's 50-plus votes at the United Nations could also help advance Beijing's efforts to reshape multilateral institutions and reinterpret global norms so that they are more in line with its interests, particularly on issues such as human rights.

While current U.S. President Joe Biden's December trip to Angola was his only visit to sub-Saharan Africa in his presidency, China puts Africa at the front of its diplomatic calendar.

"China has become central to Africa's policy, as an actor and an inspiration," said Hannah Ryder, founder of Development Reimagined, an African-owned consultancy, referring to how candidates vying to chair the African Union Commission have talked up Beijing's ability to improve Africa's manufacturing capabilities and China's track record in mass education ahead of February's election.

The commission is the secretariat of the 55-nation African Union.

Russia Captures 'Important Logistics Hub' in East Ukraine



Residents and bomb squad members stand in front of a house destroyed by a Russian missile strike, amid Russia's attack on Ukraine in Chernihiv, Jan. 4, 2025.

MOSCOW (AFP) -- Russia said Monday its forces had captured the "important logistics hub" of Kurakhove in eastern Ukraine in what would be a key advance after months of steady gains in the area.

Moscow has been pressing hard in eastern Ukraine, and the claimed capture of the industrial town is a major boost for its forces just two weeks before U.S. President-elect Donald Trump comes to power, having vowed to strike a peace deal.

Both sides are looking to secure a better position on the battlefield before his 20 January inauguration. Moscow said Kyiv had launched its own counter-offensive on Russian territory over the weekend.

Russian units "have fully liberated the town of Kurakhove -- the biggest settlement in southwestern Donbas," the defense ministry said on Telegram.

Ukrainian forces did not confirm the claim, saying only that Russia was "conducting assault operations in the urban area of Kurakhove".

"Measures are underway to identify and destroy enemy assault groups trying to infiltrate our combat formations," the army said.

Ukraine's General Staff said on Facebook that its forces "repelled 27 attacks in the Kurakhove sector".

The industrial town of Kurakhove, which had a pre-conflict population of around 22,000 people, is located next to a reservoir and is home to a power sta-

tion.

In a visit close to the town last November, AFP journalists saw abandoned houses, shattered by bombs, and empty supermarket shelves as residents fled in the face of Russia's grinding advance and daily bomb attacks.

The Russian defense ministry said Monday that Ukrainian forces had turned it into "a powerful fortified area with a developed network of long-standing firing positions and underground communications".

It called the town "an important logistics hub" and said its capture would allow Russian forces to seize the rest of the Donetsk region "at an accelerated pace".

It also said Ukraine's supply operations in the wider area would be "significantly hampered".

The capture of Kurakhove comes at a critical juncture in the conflict.

Trump has promised to bring a swift end to nearly three years of fighting, without proposing any concrete proposals for a ceasefire or peace deal.

In an interview with U.S. podcaster Lex Fridman released Sunday, Zelensky said Ukraine would be crucial to any possible end to the conflict.

Ukraine is also trying to strengthen its position in the final two weeks before Trump's inauguration, upping attacks on Russian territory with U.S.-supplied weapons.

News in Brief

PARIS (AP) — France's former President Nicolas Sarkozy went on trial Monday over alleged illegal financing of his 2007 presidential campaign by the government of late Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi. The so-called "Libyan case," the biggest and possibly most shocking of several scandals involving Sarkozy, is scheduled to run until April 10, with a verdict expected at a later date. Sarkozy, 69, faces charges of passive corruption, illegal campaign financing, concealment of embezzlement of public funds and criminal association, punished by up to 10 years in prison. Sarkozy, who served as president from 2007 to 2012, has denied any wrongdoing. The trial involves 11 other defendants, including three former ministers. Franco-Lebanese businessman Ziad Takieddine, accused of having played the role of intermediary, has fled in Lebanon and is not expected to appear at the Paris court. Sarkozy, who had welcomed Gadhafi to Paris with great honors in 2007, became one of the first Western leaders to push for a military intervention in Libya in March 2011, when Arab Spring pro-democracy protests swept the Arab world.

BANDA ACEH, Indonesia (AFP) More than 260 Rohingya refugees, including women and children, arrived in Indonesia's easternmost province of Aceh after floating at sea for days, an official said Monday. The mostly Muslim ethnic Rohingya are heavily persecuted in Myanmar and thousands risk their lives each year on long and dangerous sea journeys to reach Malaysia or Indonesia. An East Aceh official, Iskandar -- who like many Indonesians goes by one name -- said this latest group of refugees arrived on a beach in the region's town of West Peureulak on Sunday night around 10:25 pm local time (1525 GMT Sunday). "There are 264 of them -- 117 men and 147 women," Iskandar told AFP Monday, adding that in the group, around 30 were children. He said they had initially been on two boats, one of which had sunk off the coast while the second managed to move closer to shore. They could then walk to the shore when the tide was low, he said.

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — Indonesia's new government started an ambitious project on Monday to fight malnutrition by feeding nearly 90 million children and pregnant women that is expected to cost \$28 billion through 2029, although critics question whether the program is affordable. The Free Nutritious Meal program delivers on a campaign promise by President Prabowo Subianto, who was elected last year to lead the nation, which has more than 282 million people and Southeast Asia's largest economy. He said the program aims to fight the stunting of growth that afflicts 21.5% of Indonesian children younger than 5 and would raise the income of farmers. Subianto has pledged to accelerate GDP growth to 8% from 5% now. In his inauguration speech in October, Subianto said many children are malnourished. His promise to provide free school lunches and milk to 83 million students at more than 400,000 schools is part of a longer-term strategy to develop the nation's human resources to achieve a "Golden Indonesia" generation by 2045.

LONDON (Reuters) -- Britain was bracing for more snow, rain and flooding on Monday as severe weather disrupted road and rail travel and forced airports in northern England to temporarily close their runways, delaying dozens of flights. The Met Office had warnings in place for snow, ice and rain across much of the UK, while the Environment Agency said flooding was expected at over 150 locations due to rain and melting snow. Flooding or heavy rain had delayed or cancelled dozens of trains, Britain's National Rail said. Some major roads in northern and central England were also closed due to snow or flooding, National Highways said. Early on Monday, Manchester Airport temporarily closed its runways due to heavy snow, following a similar move by Liverpool Airport on Sunday. The Met Office said parts of the UK had faced their coldest night of the winter so far, with temperatures in parts of Scotland falling as low as minus 13.3 degrees Celsius (8.1 Fahrenheit).

BERLIN (AFP) -- The death toll from a car ramming attack on a Christmas market in the eastern German city of Magdeburg in December has risen to six, prosecutors said on Monday. A 52-year-old woman has died in hospital as a result of injuries she sustained in the attack, the prosecutors said in the nearby city of Naumburg said. A black BMW ploughed through the traditional market on December 20, running over and scattering bodies amid the festive stalls. A total of 299 people were injured in the attack, according to the latest figures from the state interior ministry. A Saudi doctor of psychiatry, Taleb al-Abdumohsen, 50, was arrested at the scene, but the suspected attacker's motive remains unclear. Abdumohsen had in many online posts voiced strongly anti-Islam views, anger at German authorities and support for far-right conspiracy narratives on the "Islamization" of Europe.