

World News Roundup

North Korea

Rights record 'absent'

Trump hints of news on 3 Americans detained

WASHINGTON, May 3, (Agencies): US President Donald Trump hinted Wednesday that there would be imminent news about three Americans detained in North Korea, after sources said they had been relocated ahead of their possible release.

The development comes as Trump is preparing for a historic summit meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, following months of tense saber-rattling over the North's nuclear and missile programs.

"The past Administration has long been asking for three hostages to be released from a North Korean Labor camp, but to no avail. Stay tuned!" Trump wrote on Twitter.

Two of the three hostages were detained in 2017, after Trump had assumed office.

The United States has been demanding the North free Kim Hak-song, Kim Sang-duk and Kim Dong-chul and reports have said the two sides were close to reaching a deal on their release.

"They are staying in a hotel on the outskirts of Pyongyang," Choi Sung-ryong, a South Korean activist with contacts in the North told AFP earlier, adding the three were being kept separately but "going on tours, receiving medical treatment and eating good food."

Diplomatic sources in Pyongyang have said there were rumors that the three had been relocated, but there had been no confirmation of their exact whereabouts.

A State Department official could not confirm the reports, but added: "We are working to see US citizens who are detained in North Korea come home as soon as possible."

The matter was discussed when US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo travelled to Pyongyang last month, according to The Wall Street Journal.

And speaking to Fox News on Sunday, National Security Advisor John Bolton said releasing the hostages would be "an opportunity" for the North to "demonstrate their authenticity."

Kim Dong-chul, a South Korea-born American pastor, has been detained in the North since 2015 when he was arrested for spying. He was sentenced to 10 years' hard labor in 2016.

Kim Hak-song and Kim Sang-duk — or Tony Kim — were both working at the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology, founded by evangelical Christians from overseas, when they were detained last year on suspicion of "hostile acts."

CNN had said the prisoners' release was also discussed at three-day talks in Stockholm between the North's Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho and Swedish counterpart Margot Wallstrom in March.

Sweden represents Washington's interests in the North.

Tensions between North Korea and its neighbors as well as the US spiked last year over the Pyongyang's testing of atomic weapons and long-range missiles, including some capable of reaching the US mainland.

But a spectacular detente in recent months, with a summit approaching between Trump and Kim, and the prospect of denuclearization, have fed hopes of a historic turning point in the region.

Meanwhile, absent from last week's summit between the leaders of North and South Korea was Pyongyang's human rights record, and the issue appears to have faded from Trump's public agenda as he prepares for his own meeting with Kim Jong Un.

Defectors

Rights activists and North Korean defectors fear that when Trump sits down with Kim, possibly as soon as this month, he may avoid the thorny issue of rights altogether if that helps seal a deal on getting North Korea to abandon nuclear weapons.

Just a few months ago, rights abuses were a focal point of Trump's criticism of North Korea, along with its pursuit of nuclear-armed missiles. Trump called Kim "obviously a madman who doesn't mind starving or killing his people".

More recently, Trump called Kim "very honorable" and "open".

"President Trump should raise human rights concerns with Kim Jong Un, but I would be very surprised if he does," said Phil Robertson, deputy director of advocacy group Human Rights Watch's Asia division. "He will not let human rights stand in the way of a deal, that's for sure."

Former US officials and diplomats have criticized Trump for often playing down rights in his foreign policy, except when it comes to abuses by certain US adversaries like Cuba, Venezuela, and North Korea — at least until recently.

The White House did not respond immediately to a question on whether Trump would raise human rights broadly with Kim at their summit. But it referred to Trump's recent assurance to Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe that he would bring up the issue of North Korea's abduction of Japanese citizens.

The US State Department said on Wednesday it remained "gravely concerned and deeply troubled" by rights abuses and "will continue to press for accountability for those responsible".

Last month, the State Department labelled China, Russia, Iran and North Korea as "morally reprehensible" governments it said violated human rights within their borders on a daily basis, making them "forces of instability".

During his visit to Pyongyang last month, then-CIA director Mike Pompeo also spoke to Kim about the fate of three American citizens held in North Korea, and in a tweet on Thursday, Trump said to "stay tuned" for news of the men.

The North Korean mission at the United Nations did not respond to requests for comment, but state media has released a steady flow of commentaries in recent weeks, warning that taking issue with rights could undermine the recent detente.



Trump



This handout picture taken and released on May 2, 2018 by the Turkish presidential press service shows (from left), Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, his wife Emine Erdogan, South Korean President Moon Jae-in, and his wife Kim Jung-sook during an official welcoming ceremony at the Presidential Palace in Seoul. (AFP)

Maritime

Philippines boosts maritime deterrent

China installs missiles on Sea outposts

WASHINGTON, May 3, (RTRS): China has installed anti-ship cruise missiles and surface-to-air missile systems on three of its outposts in the South China Sea, US news network CNBC reported, citing sources with direct knowledge of US intelligence reports.

The installations, if confirmed, would mark the first Chinese missile deployments in the Spratly Islands, where several Asian countries including Vietnam and Taiwan have rival claims.

China has made no mention of any missile deployments but says its military facilities in the Spratlys are purely defensive, and that it can do what it likes on its own territory.

China's Defense Ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the latest report.

The foreign ministry said China has irrefutable sovereignty over the Spratly Islands and that its necessary defensive deployments were for national security needs and not aimed at any country.

"Those who do not intend to be aggressive have no need to be worried or scared," ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying told reporters in Beijing. China "hopes relevant parties can objectively and calmly view this", she added.

CNBC quoted unnamed sources as saying that according to US intelligence assessments, the missiles were moved to Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef and Mischief Reef within the past 30 days.

The US Defense Department, which opposes China's installation of military facilities on outposts it has built up in the South China Sea, declined comment. "We don't comment on matters of intelligence," a spokesman said.

Greg Poling, a South China Sea expert at Washington's Center for Strategic and International Studies think-tank, said deploying missiles on the outposts would be important.

"These would be the first missiles in the Spratlys, either surface to air, or anti-ship," he said.

pleted the purchase of its first-ever ship-borne missile systems, boosting its maritime deterrent as part of a military modernisation programme, defence and navy officials said on Wednesday.

The Israeli-made Spike ER missiles were fitted on locally manufactured gunboats, known as multi-purpose attack craft, said **Arsenio Andolong**, defence ministry spokesman. It is unclear when the short-range surface-to-surface, surface-to-air missile systems will become operational.

A senior naval commander said the Philippines would now be more of a force in patrolling the South China Sea and its pirate-plagued southern waters.

"It will be a deterrent because, this time, we have a credible armament that can strike a punch whether the target is a small or large ship," said the commander, who declined to be identified because he is not authorised to speak to the media.

The missiles have a maximum range of 8 kms (5 miles).

Also:
MANILA: The Philippines has com-



A US naval medical trooper checks the eyesight of a Sri Lankan boy in Trincomalee on May 3. US and partner nation service members, participating in the Pacific Partnership 2018 for members of the medical profession, arrived in Trincomalee aboard a US Navy hospital ship 'USNS Mercy' on April 25. (AFP)

Subcontinent

No 'deal' on doctor - Pakistan: Pakistan's foreign ministry says that no "deal" is in the works between Islamabad and Washington for the release of a physician who helped the United States track down Osama bin Laden in 2011.

Thursday's comment by the ministry's spokesman, Mohammad Faisal, came days after Pakistani authorities moved Dr Shakil Afridi from a prison in the northwestern city of Peshawar to an undisclosed location, triggering speculation about his possible release.

Afridi has languished behind bars since 2012, when a court convicted him and sentenced him to 33 years in prison over ties with militants.

He was never formally convicted of helping CIA find bin Laden, which led to the May 2011 Navy SEALs operation that killed the al-Qaeda mastermind.

Washington seeks Afridi's release but Islamabad insists he violated the country's laws. (AP)

Ghani launches ID cards: Afghan President Ashraf Ghani launched new electronic ID cards on Thursday and faced immediate opposition in his own government toward a system that has fueled bitter rows over ethnic politics only months before parliamentary elections are due.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani speaks during a peace and security cooperation conference in Kabul, Afghanistan Feb 28, 2018. REUTERS/Omar Sobhani

The much delayed e-tezkera system, named after the local term for iden-

tity cards, is intended to reduce fraud, streamline public administration and give a clearer picture of the population by centralizing data on one digitized card.

E-tezkera will help security in the country, Ghani said at a ceremony at which he received the first card to be issued. (RTRS)

Bus catches fire, 20 feared dead: Police say a bus has caught fire after falling into a ditch along a highway in eastern India and casualties are feared. The Press Trust of India news agency says 20 people

are feared dead in Thursday's accident in Bihar state.

Police officer Upendra Sharma confirmed the accident and said rescue work is continuing near Motihari, a town in Bihar state. The bus was on its way to New Delhi from Muzaffarpur, another town in the state.

More than 110,000 people are killed annually on India's roads. Most accidents are attributed to reckless driving, poorly maintained roads and aging vehicles. (AP)

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