

North Korea launches second suspected ballistic missile in a week

North Korea fired a suspected ballistic missile into the sea, South Korea's military said Tuesday, ratcheting up tensions less than a week after Pyongyang reported testing what it said was a hypersonic missile.

The early-morning launch came as the United Nations Security Council met in New York to discuss last week's test of what Pyongyang called a hypersonic missile, although Seoul has cast doubt on that claim.

After an emergency meeting, South Korea's national security council expressed "strong regret over the launch," according to a statement from the president's office.

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida told reporters it was "extremely regrettable that North Korea continues to launch missiles."

The United States Indo-Pacific Command issued a brief statement identical to the one it issued in response to last week's launch.

Tuesday's statement said in part that, "While we have assessed that this event does not pose an immediate threat to U.S. personnel or territory, or to our allies, the missile launch highlights the destabilizing impact of the DPRK's illicit weapons program. The U.S. commitment to the defense of the Republic of Korea and Japan remains ironclad."

There were no immediate reports of damage to Japanese aircraft or vessels, according to Japanese government spokesman Hirokazu Matsuno.

"(The suspected missile) is estimated to have flown approximately up to 700 kilometers (435 miles) and landed outside of Japan's exclusive economic zone," he said.

Seoul's Joint Chiefs of Staff said it had been fired from land at around 7:27 a.m. local time Tuesday (5:27 p.m. EST on Monday).

Pyongyang didn't issue any immediate claims about its latest test.

The second one in a week came after six countries, including the United States and Japan, urged North Korea Monday to cease "destabilizing actions" ahead of a U.N. Security Council closed-door meeting. France, Britain, Ireland and Albania joined the call for North Korea to "engage in meaningful dialogue towards our shared goal of complete denuclearization."

CBS News' Pamela Falk at the U.N. said the six nations' joint statement, delivered by U.S. Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield, condemned North Korea for the latest missile test, which it said demonstrated the isolated nation's "determination to expand its unlawful weapons capabilities," which in turn heighten the "risk of miscalculation and escalation and pose a significant threat to regional stability."

Analysts said Pyongyang had likely planned the latest launch to coincide with the U.N. meeting.

"North Korea continues testing to diversify its nuclear arsenal, but it timed the launch on the day of the UNSC meeting to maximize its political impact," Shin Beom-chul, a researcher at the Korea Research Institute for National Strategy, told AFP.

The frequency of testing indicated Pyongyang could be fitting in the launches ahead of the Beijing Olympics next month, said Park Won-gon, a professor at the Ewha Womans University in Seoul.

North Korea has been barred from the Beijing Winter Olympics after skipping the pandemic-delayed Tokyo Games over COVID-19 concerns, a move Pyongyang has blamed on "hostile forces."

In the decade since leader Kim Jong Un took power, North Korea has seen rapid progress in its military technology at the cost of international sanctions.

In 2021, nuclear-armed North Korea said it had successfully tested a new type of submarine-launched ballistic missile, a long-range cruise missile, a train-launched weapon, and what it described as a hypersonic warhead.

South Korea has cast doubts over Pyongyang's hypersonic claims, saying last week's test represented limited progress on the regime's existing ballistic missiles.

A second hypersonic test so soon could indicate last week's launch was actually a failure, said Kim Dong-yub, a professor at the University of North Korean Studies.

"It's hard to understand why they would carry out another test less than a week after they announced a success," he added.

The Associated Press cited some experts as saying the latest test may have been Pyongyang's reaction to Seoul downplaying last week's test.

Hypersonic missiles move far faster and are more agile than standard ones, making them much harder for missile defense systems — on which the United States is spending billions — to intercept.

They were listed among the "top priority" tasks for strategic weapons in North Korea's current five-year plan, and it announced its first test - of the Hwasong-8 - last September.

The tests come as North Korea has refused to respond to U.S. appeals for talks.

At a key meeting of North Korea's ruling party last month, Kim vowed to continue building up the country's defense capabilities, without mentioning America.

Instead of policy positions on diplomacy, for which Kim's New Year statements are closely watched, he focused on food security and economic development.

Dialogue between Washington and Pyongyang remains stalled and the country is under multiple sets of international sanctions over its nuclear and ballistic missile programs.

The impoverished nation has also been under a rigid self-imposed coronavirus blockade that has hammered its economy.

CBS News' Lucy Craft says the regime's work on even more advanced rockets, including harder-to-intercept, trajectory-shifting hypersonic glide missiles, have caused particular alarm in Tokyo.

Japan's so-called "peace constitution," written in the wake of its defeat in World War II, restricts its armed forces to self-defense only. But as North Korea accelerates its weapons development, Japan has announced that it's considering a fundamental shift in its governing document that would grant its military the

ability to strike enemy targets, including missile sites.

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