

North Korea fires rocket seen as covert missile test, draws world's ire

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Seoul: North Korea launched a long-range rocket on Sunday, violating UN resolutions and doubling down against an international community already determined to punish Pyongyang for a nuclear test last month.

The rocket was fired from North Korea's west coast and tracked separately by the governments Japan and South Korea, which immediately convened an emergency national security council meeting.

South Korean media reported that the rocket may have failed, but provided no other details. The South Korean government couldn't immediately confirm the reports.

The rocket was fired at about 9:30 a.m. local time (0030 GMT) from the DPRK's Tongchang-ri launch station on its west coast, Xinhua quoted a report by Yonhap news agency which cited South Korea's defence authorities.

The launch came about two hours after an eight-day launch window opened Sunday morning. It follows North Korea's widely disputed claim last month to have tested a hydrogen bomb. Washington, Seoul and their allies will consider it a further provocation and will push for more tough sanctions in the United Nations.

A South Korean defense official, speaking on condition of anonymity because of office rules, said the rocket disappeared from South Korean military radars around six minutes after its launch. The official said there were no immediate reports of debris landing on South Korean territory or damaging property. The rocket's first stage fell off South Korea's west coast, the official said.

Japan's NHK broadcaster showed footage of an object visible in the skies from the southern island of Okinawa that was believed to be the rocket. Japanese chief Cabinet spokesman Yoshihide Suga told reporters that no debris fell on Japanese territory.

North Korean rocket and nuclear tests are seen as crucial steps toward the North's ultimate goal of a nuclear armed long-range missile arsenal. North Korea under leader Kim Jong Un has pledged to bolster its nuclear arsenal unless Washington scraps what Pyongyang calls a hostile policy meant to collapse Kim's government.

The global condemnation began almost immediately.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe called the North Korean rocket launch and the recent nuclear test violations of U.N. agreements.

"We absolutely cannot allow this," he told reporters at the prime minister's residence. "We will take action to totally protect the safety and well-being of our people."

U.S. National Security Adviser Susan Rice said in a statement that "North Korea's missile and nuclear weapons programs represent serious threats to our interests— including the security of some of our closest allies— and undermine peace and security in the broader region."

The United States and Japan requested an emergency meeting of the U.N. Security Council on Sunday morning. Their request said that North Korea has violated a Security Council ban on ballistic missile launches.

Kim Jong Un has overseen two of the North's four nuclear tests and three long-range rocket tests since taking over after the death of his father, dictator Kim Jong Il, in late 2011. North Korea says its rocket launches are satellite missions, but the U.S., South Korea and others say they are a covert test of ballistic missile technology. The U.N. Security Council prohibits North Korea from nuclear and ballistic missile activity. Experts say that ballistic missiles and rockets in satellite launches share similar bodies, engines and other technology.

The Jan. 6 nuclear test has led to another push in the U.N. to tighten sanctions. North Korea in 2013 also did a nuclear test and then unnerved the international community by orchestrating an escalating campaign of bombast, including threats to fire nuclear missiles at the U.S. and Seoul.

The Korean border is the world's most heavily armed and the rivals' navies occasionally trade gunfire near a disputed boundary in the Yellow Sea.

North Korea has spent decades trying to develop operational nuclear weapons.

It is thought to have a small arsenal of atomic bombs and an impressive array of short- and medium-range missiles. But it has yet to demonstrate that it can produce nuclear bombs small enough to place on a missile, or missiles that can reliably deliver their bombs to faraway targets.

Still, the North's nuclear tests and steadily improving long-range rocket launches push its nuclear aims further along.

North Korea has said that plutonium and highly enriched uranium facilities at its main Nyongbyon nuclear complex are in operation. The country is thought to have a handful of rudimentary nuclear bombs but there is debate about whether it is capable of building warheads small enough to mount on a missile that could threaten the United States.

North Korea has spent decades trying to perfect a multistage, long-range rocket. After several failures, it put its first satellite into space with a long-range rocket launched in December 2012.

Six-nation negotiations on dismantling North Korea's nuclear program in exchange for aid fell apart in early 2009.

Under Kim Jong Un, a February 2012 deal for the United States to provide 240,000 metric tons of food aid in exchange for a freeze in nuclear and missile activities collapsed after a rocket launch by the North that April.

- (With AP Inputs)