

US Senate passes bill to expand sanctions on North Korea

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Washington: The US Senate on Wednesday unanimously passed the legislation to widen harsher sanctions on North Korea in response to its recent nuclear test and missile launch.

The Senate legislation expands and tightens enforcement of sanctions against North Korea nuclear and ballistic missile development and other destructive activities, said Democratic Senator Robert Menendez, a co-sponsor of the bill.

The bill would require US President Barack Obama to sanction anyone involved with North Korea nuclear weapons programme, arms-related materials, luxury goods, human rights abuses, activities that negatively impact cybersecurity and the use of coal or metals in any of the activities.

Penalties would include the seizure of assets, visa bans and denial of government contracts.

"It ... leaves no doubt about our determination to neutralize any threat with robust, realistic diplomacy to reach the clear goal of a denuclearised Korean Peninsula," said Menendez. "It is time now for the United States to take the North Korea challenge seriously."

The move comes after Pyongyang said it had launched a Kwangmyongsong-4 Earth observation satellite into orbit Sunday and last month tested what it claimed was a hydrogen bomb.

The US has condemned North Korea's "destabilising and provocative" actions and vowed to "take all necessary steps to defend ourselves and our allies."

On January 12, US House of Representatives overwhelmingly passed legislation to impose harsher sanctions against Pyongyang in response to its nuclear test.

US intelligence chief James Clapper told lawmakers Tuesday that North Korea has expanded a uranium enrichment facility and restarted a plutonium production reactor.

The Korean nuclear weapons and missile programmes will "continue to pose a serious threat to US interests and to the security environment in East Asia in 2016," Clapper said.

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