

North Korea fires ballistic missile to test Trump's response

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Seoul: North Korea fired a ballistic missile early Sunday in an apparent "provocation to test the response from the new US administration under President Donald Trump," South Korea said today.

South Koreans watch North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's New Year's speech

The South Korean defence ministry, sharing the details of the launch, said that it was launched around 7:55 am (local time) from Banghyon air base in the western province of North Pyongan Province and flew east towards the Sea of Japan (East Sea).

Banghyon is a North Pyongan Province, which is where South Korean officials have said the North test launched its powerful midrange Musudan missile on October 15 and 20 last year.

The military in Seoul said that the missile flew about 500 kilometers (310 miles). But Yonhap news agency reported that while determinations are still being made, it was not believed to be an ICBM.

The exact type of missile had yet to be identified.

"It is believed that today's missile launch ... is aimed at drawing global attention to the North by boasting its nuclear and missile capabilities," the ministry said in a statement.

"It is also believed that it was an armed provocation to test the response from the new US administration under President Trump," it added.

There was no immediate confirmation from the North, which had recently warned it is ready to test its first intercontinental ballistic missile. The reports come as Trump was hosting Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and just days before the North is to mark the birthday of leader Kim Jong Un's late father, Kim Jong Il.

In Washington, public affairs officers for the Defense Department and the State Department had no immediate comment on the report.

The missile is believed to have splashed down into the sea between the Korean Peninsula and Japan. Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga told reporters the missile did not hit Japanese territorial seas.

The North conducted two nuclear tests and a slew of rocket launches last year in continued efforts to expand its nuclear weapons and missile programs. Its supreme leader Kim Jong Un said in his New Year's address that the country has reached the final stages of readiness to test an ICBM, which would be a major step forward in its efforts to build a credible nuclear threat to the United States.

Earlier this month, he newly-appointed US Defense Secretary James Mattis warned North Korea that any nuclear attack would be met with an "effective and overwhelming" response.

"Any attack on the United States or our allies will be defeated and any use of nuclear weapons would be met with a response that would be effective and overwhelming," Mattis said.

Though Pyongyang has been relatively quiet about the transfer of power to the Trump administration, its state media has repeatedly called for Washington to abandon its "hostile policy" and vowed to continue its nuclear and missile development programs until the U.S. changes its diplomatic approach.

Just days ago, it also reaffirmed its plan to conduct more space launches, which it staunchly defends but which have been criticized because they involve dual use technology that can be transferred to improve missiles.

Kim Dong-yeop, an analyst at the Institute for Far Eastern Studies in Seoul, speculated the missile could be a Musudan or a similar rocket designed to test engines for an intercontinental ballistic missile that could hit the U.S. mainland. Analysts are divided, however, over how close the North is to having a reliable long-range rocket that could be coupled with a nuclear warhead capable of striking U.S. targets.

South Korea's Acting President and Prime Minister Hwang Kyo-ahn said that his country will punish North Korea for the missile launch.

According to the Foreign Ministry, South Korea will continue to work with allies including the United States, Japan and the European Union to ensure a thorough implementation of sanctions against the North and make the country realize that it will "never be able to survive" without discarding all of its nuclear and missile programs.

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