

## **US and South Korea to deploy THAAD antimissile system to counter North Korea**

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**Seoul:** In a counter to any possible aggression by Pyongyang, US Defense Secretary James Mattis has asserted his country's commitment to deploy an advanced anti-missile system in South Korea "as soon as possible". The development comes after South Korean Prime Minister and Acting President Hwang Kyo-ahn on Wednesday called for greater international sanctions on North Korea, a media report said.

Mattis promised support during a telephone conversation with his South Korean counterpart Han Min-koo on Tuesday, Efe news reported.

The call took place on the eve of the joint annual military exercises amid high tension on the Korean peninsula following Pyongyang's latest missile test and the murder of its leader's half-brother Kim Jong-nam in Malaysia.

Han and Mattis discussed the decision to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) missile shield in 2017.

The THAAD would be installed on the South Korean territory with the aim of intercepting missiles launched by North Korea.

Hwang Kyo-ahn's call for sanctions came after the murder of the North Korean leader's half-brother with a chemical weapon at the Malaysian airport on February 13, an incident for which Seoul blamed Pyongyang.

Kim Jong-nam died after two women at the Kuala Lumpur airport approached him and allegedly sprayed his face with VX nerve agent, killing him within minutes on his way to hospital.

In addition to the two women -- a Vietnamese and an Indonesian -- Malaysian police also have a North Korean chemist in custody.

According to Malaysian police, four North Koreans recruited the women to commit the murder and fled to Pyongyang on the day of the crime.

The acting head of the government said Seoul would work with the international community to increase sanctions and pressure on Pyongyang, including the UN Security Council resolutions.

“The recent murder of Kim Jong-nam has revealed what the North Korean regime truly is: brutal, reckless and inhumane,” said Hwang Kyo-ahn.

Hwang was speaking on the occasion of the 98th anniversary of the Korean Independence Movement.

“The whole world was immensely shocked by the terrorist act committed at an international airport in a third country with a chemical weapon that is prohibited by international law,” said Hwang Kyo-ahn.

The South Korean government on Tuesday formalised the purchase of land for the installation of the THAAD system, a project that sparked strong criticism from China and Russia, who also consider it a threat.

However, Mattis reaffirmed that any attack by North Korea on the US or its allies would receive an "effective and overwhelming" response, sources from the government told Yonhap news agency.

The new US Secretary of Defense's message was similar to his previous one given during his trip to South Korea earlier in February, which was his first visit to the country post-appointment.

Han stressed on the importance of the joint Foal Eagle military exercise, which started on Wednesday, in order to "keep peace on the Korean peninsula".

The US would also employ aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson, F-35 and the bombers B-1B and B-52 during these drills, Defence Ministry sources told Yonhap.

Pyongyang has repeatedly protested against these joint military exercises, which it considers a trial to invade its territory.

The latest drills come after Seoul claimed that Pyongyang plotted the alleged murder of Kim Jong-nam in Malaysia.

The North Korean regime had also launched a medium-range missile on February 12, the first since Trump took office.

- (With inputs from IANS)