**Top Russian, Chinese officials to visit North Korea in post-pandemic first**

North Korea will this week welcome Russia's defence minister and a high-level Chinese delegation to Pyongyang for Korean War armistice anniversary celebrations, state media said Tuesday, a sign it could be reopening its borders to high-level visitors after a lengthy pandemic closure, AFP reports.

"A military delegation of the Russian Federation led by Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu will pay a congratulatory visit to the DPRK," the Korean Central News Agency said, a day after it confirmed a Chinese delegation would also attend the Thursday event.

Russia, one of Pyongyang's historic allies, remains one of a handful of nations that maintains friendly relations with the North, and its leader Kim Jong Un has recently been steadfast in his support for Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, including, Washington says, supplying rockets and missiles.

"This visit will contribute to strengthening Russian-North Korean military ties and will be an important step in the development of cooperation between the two countries," the Russian Defence Ministry said in a statement.

China, North Korea's main trading partner, also confirmed Tuesday it would send a delegation led by Politburo member Li Hongzhong.

The foreign visitors are set to attend events in Pyongyang to mark 70 years since the signing of the armistice, known as Victory Day in the North, which KCNA said would be celebrated in a "grand manner that will go down in history".

A large-scale military parade and other events are expected to be held this week, with satellite images indicating that soldiers and civilians have been training for the parade for months, Seoul-based specialist site NK News reported.

Leader Kim's biggest nuclear-capable missiles and other military capabilities are likely to roll through Kim Il Sung Square during the event, it added.

- Seoul, Washington monitoring -

Seoul's defence ministry said Tuesday it had detected more "people and equipment" in the capital Pyongyang, adding that South Korean and US intelligence agencies were closely monitoring the North's upcoming celebration.

The visits by the Chinese and Russian delegations are the first known visits by any foreign delegations since the start of the pandemic.

North Korea has been under a rigid self-imposed coronavirus blockade since early 2020 to protect itself from Covid-19, which has prevented even its own nationals from entering the country.

It only resumed some trade with China last year, and allowed Beijing's new envoy to take up his position this year.

Beijing said the delegation would travel to Pyongyang on Wednesday, suggesting they would not be required to undergo an extensive quarantine ahead of the Thursday anniversary event.

An armistice agreement ending Korean War hostilities was signed on July 27, 1953 but the two Koreas remain technically at war because the agreement was never replaced by a peace treaty.

"It is expected that North Korea will try to reap the benefit of Beijing condoning its nuclear development by unveiling a new ICBM when a Chinese high-level delegation attends its large-scale military parade," Yang Moo-jin, president of the University of North Korean Studies in Seoul, told AFP.

"It seems that the intention is to show off the strengthening of solidarity between North Korea and China amidst the global political disruption caused by the ongoing US-China conflict."

He added that it could also be a sign that the border between the North and China might be reopened in the not too distant future.

Beijing is North Korea's most important ally and economic benefactor, their relationship forged in the bloodshed of the Korean War in the 1950s.

US submarines

North Korea fired two ballistic missiles late Monday, Seoul said, the latest in a series of weapons tests in recent weeks by Pyongyang, which comes as Seoul and Washington ramp up defence cooperation.

Last week South Korea hosted a visit by a US nuclear-capable submarine, the first such deployment since 1981.

And in a move that likely further provoked the North, a second US submarine, the nuclear-powered USS Annapolis, arrived at a South Korean naval base Monday.

Relations between the two Koreas are currently at one of their lowest historical points, as diplomacy between Pyongyang and Seoul has stalled and Kim has called for ramping up weapons development, including tactical nukes.
Tensions have risen again recently due to US soldier Travis King, who was on a tour of the demilitarised zone last week when he ran across the border into North Korea.

The UN Command, a US-led multinational force that oversees the Korean War truce, said Monday it has begun discussions with Pyongyang over the American serviceman.