

North Korean artillery attack raises tensions

THE UNSTABLE military regime in North Korea has once again thrust itself into global headlines. On 23 November its artillery exchanged shellfire with South Korea on the island of Yeongpyeong, administered by South Korea off the western coast of the Korean peninsula. North Korea's attack killed four and wounded at least 20 soldiers and civilians.

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500 residents have now been evacuated from the island, a South Korean naval base. It was the most serious military clash since the Korean War ended in 1953. The nervousness of the capitalists worldwide was shown in the fact that stock markets, especially in Asia, recorded big falls as news of the military confrontation fused with worries about the euro and Ireland's debt crisis.

South Korea's military had been conducting a week-long military drill, but insisted they had not fired on the North. The most likely explanation for the North's attack is its dire economic situation and shaky process of transition within the reclusive autocratic regime from Kim Jong-il to his youngest son Kim Jong-un.

The military exchange came just days after it was revealed that North Korea has developed a new uranium enrichment facility as part of its nuclear arms programme. US intelligence claims it had no prior knowledge of the new facility.

The North Korean regime is seeking resumption of talks with South Korea and the US through which it hopes to extract economic and diplomatic concessions in exchange for agreeing to international controls and an eventual phasing out of its nuclear programme.

The latest violent incident can be seen therefore as an attempt to pressure Seoul and its main military ally, US imperialism (which has over 25,000 soldiers based in the South) to come to talks.

Both Washington and Seoul have taken an increasingly hard line, especially since the sinking of a South Korean warship in March, with the loss of 47 sailors' lives. Both governments reiterated that new talks with the North are ruled out after the artillery attack. A potentially dangerous chain of events may follow with the US and South Korea likely to increase the pressure by staging new military exercises in the area.

Stalled negotiations

THERE IS no formal peace treaty between North and South following the end of the Korean War, and the North maintains itself in a per-



Ailing North Korean leader Kim Jong-il has ruled over the country's economic collapse.

manent state of war readiness, with one in eight of the population in the military.

Previous attempts at a negotiated solution such as the "sunshine" policy that was launched by former South Korean leader Kim Dae Jung, of economic concessions in return for arms reductions and opening up, have floundered. The military stand-off is an open sore in the life of the people of the peninsula, who must deal with constant insecurity and fear of conflict as well as the grief of separated families.

Since the 1990s and the worldwide collapse of the Stalinist regimes, particularly the USSR which was its main economic partner, North Korea has experienced severe economic difficulties, with its economy in many areas regressing into pre-industrialism and up to five million of its 24 million population suffering acute food shortages.

This has led it to adopt a strategy of 'calculated unpredictability' for gaining attention, concessions and aid from the capitalist international community, especially South Korea.

Its methods include development of its nuclear programme, missile tests, and small-scale military clashes with the South. The South Korean capitalists are caught in a dilemma of having to respond firmly to this brinkmanship for reasons of their own prestige and power, but not wanting the state in the North to collapse, which would inflict massive collateral economic

costs on South Korea.

Although North Korea maintains a massive military force and could easily attack Seoul, the capital of South Korea, the combined forces of South Korea and the US are much better equipped than the North.

China's role

THE LATEST incident is also a major challenge for China, whose regime is the final ally of North Korea. This has nothing to do with ideology or a common Stalinist past, but everything to do with geopolitics.

The Beijing dictatorship, for its own reasons, wants the North Korean regime to survive as a buffer state between China and pro-US South Korea.

The prospect of a unified Korea unnerves China's rulers, as this would raise the prospect of American military bases on its eastern border, but also, after initial chaos, the possibility of a unified Korean economy becoming an economic rival, especially in its relations with the crisis-hit northeast of China, with its own ethnic Korean minority.

But the Chinese regime is made to pay a price for the diplomatic protection it affords to North Korea. Beijing was not informed in advance of the attack by North Korea, and the incident has put it in a difficult position, with growing pressure upon it from the US, South Korea and Japan to support a harder stance, for example at the United Nations.

China is unlikely to change its position, urging a resumption of the long-stalled 'six-party talks' (with the two Koreas, Russia, China, Japan and the US), but this will be at a cost as the US seizes this issue to re-establish its own position in Asia, playing upon a growing unease over China's ever-bigger regional role.

Troubled succession

A FURTHER reason for the latest incident may be the shaky succession within the dynastic North Korean regime. Kim Jong-il is reported to be very ill, perhaps sensing he has little time left, and wants to shore up the position of Kim Jong-un, his heir. The young Kim, only recently promoted to 'four star general' is

unlikely to wield the same influence as his father, whose own position took some time to consolidate after the death in 1994 of his father, Kim Il-sung.

The first Kim presided over a period of economic development in the 1960s and 1970s when the Stalinist planned economy, despite a colossal bureaucracy, delivered certain social gains.

This period has long passed as the regime of Kim Jong-il, faced with economic collapse, experimented with a series of erratic 'free market reforms', none of which have created stability or growth.

The regime is not wedded to any particular economic model, least of all a socialist one, having shown many times it is prepared to sign up for capitalist economic zones and deals with South Korean and Chinese companies and is even open to reunification with the capitalist South, although as a drawn out process.

The regime's bottom line in any negotiated settlement however is to obtain guarantees for its own survival. Despite a catalogue of problems, the regime appears to survive courtesy of extreme state-inspired nationalism, a sense of military threats, and a policy of giving small privileges to 'loyal' sections of the population - the military and part of the population in the capital, Pyongyang.

Socialists are against the presence of US imperialism in the Korean peninsula and call for the immediate withdrawal of US troops, as the first step towards a solution to the crisis.

We oppose the policies of the nationalist and militarist North Korean regime, which is only interested in securing its own future survival regardless of the costs to the Korean people.

Likewise the South Korean ruling class and others in the region, tied to the profit system and imperialism, are incapable of leading the peninsula towards a secure and non-nuclear future.

Chinaworker.info supports peace in the Korean peninsula, which can only be won by the united struggle of the working class and poor of Korea and the wider region to abolish capitalism, dictatorship and militarism.

Portugal: 'Biggest strike action ever'

OVER THREE million workers downed tools in Portugal on 24 November, as a massive general strike brought the country to a halt. It is already being termed as the country's 'biggest strike action ever'.

Cedric Gerome,
Committee for a Workers'
International (CWI)

After months of growing resistance, strike actions and massive demonstrations during the year, this general strike is a major turning point.

Potentially it could begin a new stage in the raging class battle of the Portuguese working class against the market-dictated policies of the massively rejected 'Socialist Party' (PS) minority government.

The freezing of the pensions, raising of VAT and various taxes, 5% cut in public sector wages, further attacks on welfare benefits, cuts of 15% in operational costs of public hospitals, and new road tolls, are among some of the new measures planned for the 2011 austerity budget, which was approved by parliament.

For several months Socialismo Revolucionário, the CWI's group in Portugal, has demanded that the left and the trade unions take bolder initiatives in order to unite the workers' struggles into a 24-hour general strike, as a first step in the building of a massive fight back.

After the European day of action on 29 September, and under increasing pressure from below, the decision to organise a general strike was eventually announced by the CGTP, Portugal's largest trade union. On 6 November, as a sort of 'aperitif' to the general strike, 100,000 public servants demonstrated on the streets of Lisbon, the capital city, against the budget.

Socialismo Revolucionário thinks that the general strike announced in Greece for 15 December represents the perfect occasion to build upon the success of 24 November and to concretise a sentiment which is shared by an increasing number of workers in Portugal: the necessity for coordinated strike action on an international level.

For a full report on the general strike and a strategy for the left, see www.socialistworld.net

the **committee for a
workersinternational**

THE COMMITTEE for a Workers' International (CWI) is the socialist international organisation to which the Socialist Party is affiliated. The CWI is organised in 40 countries and works to unite the working class and oppressed peoples against global capitalism and to fight for a socialist world. For more details including CWI publications write to: CWI, PO Box 3688, London E11 1YE. email cwi@worldsoc.co.uk

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'Calculated unpredictability' is the strategy of the North's regime.