

North Korea has fired suspected cruise missiles, South Korea says

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Despite a possible coronavirus outbreak in North Korea, the country has fired missiles off its east coast from the ground as well as fighter jets on Tuesday, according to South Korea's military.

The back-to-back launches were reportedly fired as a show of force on the eve of North Korea's late founder, Kim Il Sung's 108th birthday, the grandfather of current leader Kim Jong Un and parliamentary elections in the South.

During the first barrage, North Korean troops in Munchonto fired what were presumed to be cruise missiles, according to a statement by South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff. They flew roughly 93 miles off the coast, per a South Korean defense official.

North Korea has carried out short-range missile and weapons tests in recent weeks amid stalled nuclear talks with the U.S. Most of the weapons tested, however, were ballistic missiles or long-range artillery shells.



People watch a TV screen airing reports about North Korea's firing missiles with file images of missiles at the Seoul Railway Station in Seoul, South Korea,

Tuesday, April 14, 2020. South Korea says North Korean fighter jets have fired missiles off the North's east coast. \ (AP Photo/Lee Jin-man)

The use of that type of projectile is unusual considering the country reportedly possesses just two known cruise missiles purposed for anti-ship operations, according to the Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance.

If confirmed, it would be the North's first cruise missile launch since June 2017, per the defense official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Later on Tuesday, North Korea launched fighter jets which fired an unspecified number of air-to-surface missiles towards the same waters, the official added. Military drills had previously been scaled back in the North due to the coronavirus outbreak.

A test of a missile capable of reaching the U.S. homeland would end North Korea's self-imposed moratorium on major weapons tests and likely completely derail nuclear diplomacy with the United States.



A photo distributed on Aug. 30, 2017, by the North Korean government shows what was said to be the test launch of a Hwasong-12 intermediate-range missile in Pyongyang, North Korea. (Korean Central News Agency/Korea News Service via AP, File)

Some experts believe the tests were used to improve its position against South Korea while others said they were devoted to increasing unity within the country amid U.S. led sanctions during the virus outbreak.

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North Korea has repeatedly said there has been no coronavirus outbreak on its soil. But many foreign experts are skeptical of that claim and have warned that a coronavirus outbreak in the North could become a humanitarian disaster because of the country's chronic lack of medical supplies and fragile health care infrastructure.

The Associated Press contributed to this report

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