Astronauts at China's new space station conduct first spacewalk

Astronauts at China's new space station conducted their first spacewalk Sunday, state media reported, as Beijing presses on with its extraterrestrial ambitions.

It was only the second time the country's astronauts have stepped out of their craft while in space.

Three Chinese spacemen blasted off in June, docking at the Tiangong station where they are to remain for three months in China's longest crewed mission to date.

On Sunday morning, two of them exited the core cabin, said state broadcaster CCTV.

The first, Liu Boming, was transported via mechanical arm to the work site and the other, Tang Hongbo, moved by climbing on the outside of the cabin.

Their mission involves elevating the panoramic camera outside the Tianhe core module, as well as verifying the robotic arm's shorter capability, state media said.

Television footage showed the astronauts preparing for the spacewalk by donning gear and conducting health checks while exercising in the cabin.

The astronauts were later shown opening the cabin door and exiting the module, in the first of two spacewalks planned for the mission – both expected to last six or seven hours.

The launch of China's first crewed mission in nearly five years is a matter of huge prestige for the country, as Beijing marks the 100th anniversary of the ruling Communist Party this month with a massive propaganda campaign.

To prepare, the crew underwent more than 6,000 hours of training.

The Chinese space agency is planning a total of 11 launches through to the end of next year, including three more manned missions that will deliver two lab modules to expand the 70-tonne station, along with supplies and crew members.

In addition to Liu and Tang, the mission's commander is Nie Haisheng, a decorated air force pilot in the People's Liberation Army who has already participated in two space missions.

theguardian

North Korea shows no vaccine urgency, despite new virus woes

SEOUL, SOUTH KOREA - North Korea this week reported a mysterious "grave incident" that suggested a major lapse related to its coronavirus response.

Its leader, Kim Jong Un, recently acknowledged food shortages, comparing the situation to a devastating 1990s famine.

The North now acknowledges on a regular basis that it faces a worsening pandemic-related crisis, even as it continues to claim it is free of COVID-19.

Just how severe a crisis is unknown because North Korea has shut itself off from the outside world in an all-encompassing 17-month coronavirus lockdown.

What is increasingly clear, though, is that North Korea is dragging its feet on accepting the international vaccines that offer the best way out of its predicament.

North Korea has done little to advance the process to receive vaccines from COVAX, the United Nations-backed program meant to ensure fair global vaccine distribution.

Negotiations between North Korea and Gavi, a vaccine alliance that helps run COVAX, have stalled for months, with North Korea completing only two of the seven required administrative steps, according to a source familiar with the talks.

"If the DPRK had been swift with the paperwork, they would have gotten some vaccines. It's hard to say how much, but if they complied with the request from Gavi we would be well underway now," said the source, who spoke to VOA on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the discussion, using the abbreviation for North Korea's formal name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

In a statement, Gavi did not comment on the status of the negotiations.

"Work is ongoing and discussions continue with DPRK," a Gavi spokesperson said. "As we get closer to a potential delivery, we'll be able to share more information on timetables."

Gavi announced in March that it planned to distribute 1.7 million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine to North Korea by May.

Several barriers have delayed the shipment, though, including North Korean concerns about the safety and efficacy of the AstraZeneca vaccine, reluctance to sign a liability waiver in case of side effects, and refusal to allow international workers into the country to facilitate the shipment.

Global supply shortages are also to blame. India, a major producer of the AstraZeneca vaccine, earlier this year suspended vaccine exports amid its own explosion in COVID-19 cases.

North Korea appears to see the vaccine shortage as a main obstacle. In a May statement to the World Health Organization, North Korea accused countries of selfishly hoarding vaccine supplies, creating a "bottleneck" in global production.

Refrigeration issues

A big hurdle is North Korea's antiquated and uneven health care system, which limits its ability to handle many types of COVID-19 vaccines.

The country does not have a consistent electricity supply, much less the network of ultra-cold refrigerators and specialized delivery trucks needed to handle vaccines such as those produced by Pfizer and Moderna, which utilize advanced mRNA technology.

According to the source familiar with the talks, North Korea has not yet accepted international offers to help upgrade its cold supply chain network.

That means Pyongyang may be forced to choose between the AstraZeneca vaccine, or those made in China or Russia, all of which can be stored at higher temperatures. It is not clear whether North Korea has considered the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, which also does not require super cold storage.

At a briefing last week, a Chinese Foreign Affairs Ministry spokesperson refused to say whether China has provided any vaccines to North Korea, saying only Beijing was prepared to help "should there be such a need."

The Russian vaccine, Sputnik V, has also not been delivered to North Korea, according to an April report in the state-run TASS news agency, which quoted Russian Embassy officials in Pyongyang.

No foreigners

Another problem is North Korea's severe lockdown, which has prevented virtually any foreigners from entering the country.

According to the source who spoke with VOA, North Korea is refusing to allow international aid workers into the country to help facilitate the shipment, ostensibly because of fears about outsiders bringing COVID-19 into the country.

However, Gavi procedures require that international staff must be present, the source said. Gavi "won't just ship it," the source said. United Nations agencies' employees, who might have been able to help with the vaccine shipment, have left North Korea amid worsening lockdown conditions.

Will it change anytime soon?

It does not seem that North Korea will retreat from its hunkered-down position anytime soon. Kim has repeatedly warned of a "prolonged" lockdown, saying his country must maintain "perfect" anti-epidemic measures.

Many officials and diplomats in the region now privately concede that it may be years before North Korea reopens to many foreigners.

However, some analysts speculate that North Korea may have been hinting at a different pandemic approach this week when it acknowledged a "grave incident" in its pandemic stance.

Kim did not say what the lapse was, but he lambasted senior officials during a politburo meeting of the ruling Workers' Party, even replacing several of them, presumably over the situation. The move could amount to North Korea laying the groundwork for eventually accepting international help, said Ramon Pacheco-Pardo, a Korea expert at King's College London.

"The insistence on this being an international crisis, plus now admitting that this is affecting North Korea, as well, opens the door to international cooperation," Pacheco-Pardo said.

Rachel Minyoung Lee, a Seoul-based Korea specialist at the Stimson Center, though, questioned that conclusion.

"If North Korea wants to accept vaccines it can just do so," she said. "Convening a politburo meeting to do that seems unnecessarily convoluted," she added.

Meanwhile, North Korea appears to be managing expectations at home. In a May editorial, the state-run Rodong Sinman warned of a long battle against the virus, adding the vaccines produced overseas were "no universal panacea."

VOA

After the retreat: what now...

From P2

"Muslims agree with this. If you don't give sharia punishment, crimes will rise. People come to us and say they are grateful," said the judge. "When the government was in power, no robbery was investigated. Now after we came to power, people can leave their doors open."

In his court, which meets regularly and hears three or four cases a day, often on land and water disputes, "testimony from two women equals that from one man", he added.

The refugee mother conceded that the group had brought an end to lawlessness, but for her it was not enough to offset all the cruelty and restrictions.

"The Taliban have already made a really big reduction in robbery – I know many people support them and are satisfied because of this, but I don't want them [ruling the area].

"They had special people responsible for beating women, they used rope or pieces of wood to hit them," she said. Men are beaten for not praying, and not fasting during Ramadan, and there are other petty restrictions like a ban on makeup. "It was exactly like last time they were in power [before 2001]. I was in Obe then too."

One man still living in the area said: "Of course you just worry about the children's future." There was a bleak sense of history repeating itself, he said. "I was only educated until fifth grade, then I had to drop out for the same reason."

The Taliban, despite their public commitment to ending "the killing and maiming", are accused of war crimes. In the cities they have been linked to targeted assassinations; in Obe, locals say they have used families as human shields.

During the battle for the district center, women and children were ordered not to leave at least one house the Taliban were using as a base for operations for several days, residents say. They believe the family were made to serve as insurance against airstrikes by government forces or American drones.

The comprehensive capture of the district center, after years of the Taliban attacking and falling back, appears to have been made possible by an influx of fighters from other provinces, under a new commander. Rafi Shindandi, probably a nom de guerre, arrived in the area after Eid, which ended the fasting month of Ramadan in May. He brought around 60 or 70 fighters, from places including nearby Farah and Badghis provinces.

When they arrived, local Taliban warned a group of government-funded engineers working in Obe on development projects, including bridges and water supply, to leave. The engineers had previously built up a relationship with the insurgents to ensure that their civilian work, such as water supply projects, could go ahead without attacks or accidental targeting in battles.

"Local Taliban and elders told us when they arrived and warned they were dangerous," he said. "We trusted the local fighters, but in war you can't tell good and bad apart easily, and we didn't have a relationship with the new ones."

Sightings of reinforcement fighters were reported in other districts that fell to Taliban control, and may have been part of a tactic of preemptive strikes against areas that had been strongholds of resistance 20 years earlier.

"That the Taliban would launch widespread attacks while, or immediately after, US forces left was to be expected, but the scale and speed of the Afghan National Security Forces' collapse was not," said Kate Clark of the Afghanistan Analysts Network in a recent analysis of the Taliban's takeover in much of the country's north.

The insurgents held around a quarter of the country's nearly 400 district centres at the end of June, the thinktank calculated from news reports and its own investigations. Clark went on to describe "the plunging morale of members of the ANSF in the field and … a new-found confidence among Taliban fighters that military victory was coming their way".

In some provinces, almost all the areas beyond city limits have fallen; government supporters fear the Taliban is positioning for a push on provincial capitals. Although it has overrun several such capitals briefly in the past, it has not yet been able to take and hold them. That track record is likely to be put to the test soon.

Other factors undermining government forces are corruption, desertion and ill-thought-out policy. The air support vital to holding the Taliban at bay has dwindled, with the Afghan air force badly overstretched and the US now operating from thousands of miles away.

In December last year, the government disbanded a supportive unit of the militia-like Afghan Local Police in Obe, under what looks increasingly like an ill-conceived demobilization program. Several other districts that fell to Taliban control had recently lost ALP forces as well, Clark wrote.

In Obe, the Taliban attack on the district center had hardened into a siege by June. A few dozen men from the intelligence, police and army were stranded on a military base with just a glass of water a day, and dwindling food. They called desperately for air support or evacuation, but the only visitors who arrived were Red Crescent officials who had come to collect bodies.

The men had been reduced to stripping leaves off the trees to eat before a group of parents launched a three-day protest in Herat, demanding support for the besieged group. Initially polite, by day three the terrified and furious parents were burning tyres in the street and threatening suicide attacks. The next day, helicopters were dispatched, but for many it was already too late. "Bodies were carried out of injured men who would have survived if they got help sooner," said one of the commandos bitterly.

At least one of the men trapped inside, who himself comes from Obe, has been quietly sounding out friends in the area and in Herat about organizing a militia to try to reclaim the district.

For years, western-backed efforts aimed to disarm the country's irregular militias. But the Taliban's advances and the accelerated departure of foreign troops have convinced Afghans whose homes are threatened, and the officials who have to protect them, that they need more people to pick up guns and fight. Militias are forming around the country, many encouraged, financed or even called up by the government itself.

The fighter from Obe has lost brothers, his father and at least 20 more distant relatives to the Taliban, and refuses to consider surrender or collaboration. "The situation is catastrophic, and the government won't even listen to me," he said. "So now my work is just to be killed, or liberate my town."

This article first appeared in Guardian

Bangladesh records 6,214 new COVID-19 cases, 134 more deaths

DHAKA: Bangladesh reported 6,214 new COVID-19 cases and 134 new deaths on Saturday, taking the tally to 936,256 and death toll to 14,912, the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) said.

The official data showed that 22,687 samples were tested in the last 24 hours as of 8:00 a.m. local time across Bangladesh.

The total number of recovered patients in the country stood at 829,199, including 3,777 new recoveries on Saturday, said the DGHS.

According to the official data, the COVID-19 fatality rate in Bangladesh is 1.59 percent and the current recovery rate is 88.57 percent.

Bangladesh recorded the highest daily new cases of 8,822 on June 30 and the highest number of 143 deaths on July 1.

Xinhua

3 ways student debt impacts...

From P4

"All those assets that the boomers have been accumulating to feed the economy, who's going to buy those assets? Who's going to take over to make sure that the stock and asset markets keep going up?" asks Richardson. "Maybe boomers can leave those through inheritance to their children, but that just concentrates wealth, which gets back to the issue of inequality."

3. Delinquency

Finally, there is the concern that many borrowers are expected to default on their student loans.

Currently, about $158.5 billion worth of federally managed student loans are considered in default — and this total may increase once the pause on federal student loan payments expires. Brookings estimates that by 2023, nearly 40% of borrowers are expected to default on their student loans.

"If you have delinquencies, that lowers credit scores, and that's problematic in terms of doing anything in the economy from getting a credit card to getting a mortgage," says Richardson, citing ADP data that suggests student loans account for 35% of severely derogatory loan balances, more than three times the delinquency rate of mortgages.

Richardson fears that because of student loan difficulties, borrowers will be held back from generating wealth through means such as buying a home or starting a business. "When you think about how the middle class builds wealth over time, there's two ways in the U.S.: homeownership and entrepreneurship," she says.

While consumer spending appears to be stable for now, Richardson stresses that the student debt crisis should be addressed in order to maintain economic growth.

"If you're very focused on the here and now and the present economic recovery, you can shrug off consumer debt," she says. "But if you care about the future, and you think about what leads to feature growth and investment, then student debt is one thing that can block that."