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South Korea, U.S. Launch Annual Joint Military Drills

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– *Categories: Defence & Security*

South Korea and the United States began their annual joint military exercise on Monday, a large-scale operation designed to bolster defense readiness against North Korea. The Ulchi Freedom Shield exercise will run for 11 days, concluding on August 28, with both live training and computer-simulated command post operations.

According to South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), this year's drill will involve around 18,000 South Korean troops, with a similar level of U.S. participation. Exact figures for U.S. personnel have not been publicly released, but officials described the scale as consistent with recent years. About 40 field training exercises (FTXs) were originally planned, though the JCS confirmed that nearly half have been postponed until September because of extreme heat, safety considerations, and the need to distribute training activities more evenly across the year.

The South Korean government has emphasized that the exercise is defensive in nature. The presidential office said the drills aim to strengthen national security and protect citizens, clarifying that they are not intended to escalate tensions with North Korea.

Despite these assurances, the operation is being closely monitored in the region. North Korea has long condemned such exercises, characterizing them as preparations for invasion. In July, Kim Yo-jong, the sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, issued a statement dismissing Seoul's outreach efforts and again denouncing the joint drills.

Analysts noted that Pyongyang's response could range from issuing official statements to conducting limited military demonstrations. They suggested that smaller-scale activities,

such as artillery tests, are more likely in the near term than major missile launches. As of midday Monday, North Korea had not released an official response to the start of the exercise.

Alongside the combined military training, South Korea is also holding its annual Ulchi civil defense drill, which runs through Thursday. The nationwide exercise involves approximately 580,000 participants from 4,000 institutions, including government agencies, emergency responders, and civilians. Training scenarios include air raid evacuations and coordinated emergency response drills, reflecting the government's effort to prepare for both military and non-military crises.

The presidential office reiterated that the Ulchi civil defense drill is intended to improve public safety and emergency preparedness. Officials added that feedback from this year's training will be reviewed to strengthen future exercises, with the stated objective of enhancing peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula.

The Ulchi Freedom Shield exercise remains a central element of the U.S.–South Korea alliance, underscoring the two nations' ongoing military cooperation in the face of regional security challenges.