



NORTH KOREA AGREES TO HALT NUCLEAR PROGRAM

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North Korea has agreed to freeze its nuclear program in return for aid, ending a long diplomatic stalemate. But the country's record of broken promises has left the international community skeptical that it will disarm completely.

As a start, the communist nation says it will shut down its main plutonium processing plant in Yongbyon within two months and allow United Nations arms control inspectors who had been expelled four years ago.

"The goal is the complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. This is a good beginning to that effort," U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told reporters.

In return for disarmament, the United States and four regional partners -- China, Japan, South Korea and Russia -- would provide short-term economic, energy and humanitarian assistance to help North Korea's impoverished people. Human Rights Watch says 1 million North Koreans died in 1990s famines and that millions are now at risk of starvation.

Broken promises and caution

Negotiators are proceeding cautiously because North Korea has reneged on similar agreements.

In 2002, North Korea began secretly enriching uranium for the purpose of making nuclear weapons, according to the United States, violating a 1994 agreement exchanging energy aid for disarmament.

In 2003, North Korea withdrew from the nuclear nonproliferation treaty, an international nuclear arms control agreement administered by the International Atomic Energy Agency. And in 2005, the government announced it possessed weapons-grade plutonium.

The chance for negotiation reached a low in October 2006, when North Korea detonated a nuclear weapon, leading the United Nations to vote unanimously to impose wide-ranging economic and diplomatic sanctions.

Now, four months after the nuclear test, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill, the top American official at the recent round of negotiations, said a step-by-step approach would be best for building trust with North Korea.

"It's certainly not the end of the process, it's really just the end of the beginning of the process," Hill told reporters, according to the Associated Press.

Energy aid for North Korea

As a first step, the cooperating nations have promised North Korea 5 percent of an aid package that could include 1 million tons of fuel oil (worth about \$250 million), which would represent about two-thirds of the country's yearly consumption.

The five countries are expected to share the costs, though Japan is abstaining until North Korea accounts for Japanese citizens kidnapped in the late 1970s and the U.S. Congress would have to approve the American contributions.

The deal could provide twice the amount of oil that was outlined in the failed 1994 agreement, leading to criticism from analysts.

Nicholas Eberstadt, a North Korea expert from the American Enterprise Institute, told the NewsHour the deal "only freezes part, at most, of North Korea's nuclear activities, for a much higher price than the earlier agreement, with a regime that we now know operates in bad faith on nuclear deals."

Rice said this plan differs from the 1994 agreement because it includes North Korea's main trading partners, Russia and China, who have the power "not only to make a deal to but to make sure one sticks."

No deadlines for future diplomacy

If North Korea successfully dismantles its program -- no deadlines have yet been set -- it could lead to the removal of North Korea from the list of terror-sponsoring states.

Diplomats hope it could also lead to a peace agreement to replace the 1953 Korean War-ending cease-fire that created the heavily armed Demilitarized Zone currently separating the two Koreas.

Rice told reporters successful diplomacy with North Korea could lead to a similar agreement with Iran, which has refused to stop its nuclear program.

But John Bolton, the former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, disapproved of the plan, telling CNN, "It sends exactly the wrong signal to would-be proliferators around the world."

Bolton said the deal was flawed because it doesn't ask North Korea to give up its stock of nuclear arms and plutonium.

The Institute for Science and International Security estimates that North Korea could have enough plutonium to build as many as 13 nuclear weapons now and 17 by mid-2008.

And questions remain whether North Korean leader Kim Jong Il will completely turn over his country's nuclear weapons, his primary international bargaining chip.

Though Rice told reporters, "The joint statement covers the fact that North Korea must declare and abandon all of its nuclear programs, and everybody understands what 'all' means," North Korea's state-run media interpreted the statement as asking for a "temporary" suspension of its nuclear program.

--Compiled by Adnaan Wasey for NewsHour Extra

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