



NORTH KOREA DECLARES NUCLEAR TEST

October 9, 2006

The secretive communist nation North Korea announced Monday that it had detonated its first nuclear test, drawing condemnation from the international community.

North Korea announced the nuclear test via its official Korean Central News Agency out of the capital Pyongyang.

"It marks a historic event as it greatly encouraged and pleased the KPA (Korean People's Army) and people that have wished to have powerful self-reliant defense capability," the agency said in a statement.

As one of the world's poorest and most isolated countries, North Korea might have conducted the nuclear test as a way to show it has power in the region, Asian experts say.

Although American officials have not confirmed the test, the U.S. Geological Survey registered a seismic event equivalent to a magnitude 4.2 earthquake.

President Bush warned that North Korea's action "constitutes a threat to international peace and security." He called on the U.N. Security Council to take immediate action.

The president also warned North Korea not to share its nuclear knowledge with other states or terrorist groups.

"The transfer of nuclear weapons or material by North Korea to states or non-state entities would be considered a grave threat to the United States and we would hold North Korea fully accountable for consequences of such action," he said.

North Korea's nuclear history

North Korea's test is just the latest in an ongoing standoff with the rest of the world.

U.S. satellites first detected nuclear reactors in the country in the early 1980s.

By 1994, the United States had brokered a deal with the nation to stop its nuclear program in exchange for much-needed food aid. But that agreement eventually broke down after North Korea revealed a secret nuclear weapons program in 2002.

It was during the 2002 State of the Union Address that President Bush called North Korea one part of the "axis of evil," along with Iran and Iraq.

In 2003, North Korea announced that it was withdrawing from the nuclear nonproliferation treaty, a global agreement meant to stop the spread of nuclear weapons. The United States responded that it would not "tolerate" a nuclear-armed North Korea.

In the past three years, tensions between North Korea and other countries continued to escalate.

In July, North Korea test-fired up to seven missiles, including at least one long-range ballistic missile, upsetting the international community again.

The world's reaction

North Korea's enemies and allies alike condemned the nuclear test announcement.

China, the communist country's closet supporter, called it a "flagrant and brazen" violation of international opinion and said it "firmly opposes" North Korea's conduct.

In Russia, which shares a short border with North Korea, President Vladimir Putin said his country "absolutely condemns North Korea's nuclear test."

South Korea, which has been separated from North Korea for more than 50 years and maintains an uneasy truce with the communist nation following a civil war, criticized the test.

South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun said his country's response will be "stern but fair."

Shinzo Abe, the newly elected prime minister of Japan, said that North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons "greatly threatens the northeast Asian region" and the world.

"We are now in a new era of nuclear threat," said Abe, who is visiting South Korea for the first time. "This North Korean nuclear test is a great challenge to us, and the international community must take a firm stand on this challenge."

Possible responses

At an emergency meeting Monday, the United Nations called on North Korea to return to six-party talks about its weapons program.

In recent months, North Korea had boycotted such talks, preferring to deal one-on-one with the United States, not with a larger group of regional neighbors including: China, Russia, South Korea and Japan.

John Bolton, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, said he would push for a Security Council resolution that would include a halt to oil deliveries, as well as inspection of all cargo going in and out of the country to prevent the distribution of weapons of mass destruction.

If the test is confirmed, North Korea would become the eighth country to develop nuclear weapons despite efforts to limit proliferation beyond the five Security Council powers -- Britain, France, Russia, China and the United States -- which acquired them in the 1940s and 1950s.

India and Pakistan conducted tests in 1998. Israel is generally thought to have weapons, even though it has not acknowledged conducting a test or possessing a weapon.

-- *Compiled by Annie Schleicher for NewsHour Extra*

© 2006 MacNeil/Lehrer Productions