

North, South Korea plan high-level talks

By HANS GREIMEL

Associated Press Writer
PANMUNJOM, Korea (AP) — North and South Korea set dates for high-level talks earlier this week boosting the diplomatic drive for a peaceful solution to a nuclear dispute despite signs the North has increased military patrols near its border with the South.

The announcement that the two Koreas would hold a round of Cabinet-level meetings later this month was matched by hopeful comments by U.S. envoy James Kelly, who said before meetings in Beijing he was “reassured” by efforts to persuade the North to give up its nuclear weapons development.

The reclusive regime in Pyongyang, however, kept up its drumbeat of anti-American invective through the state-run media, blaming nuclear proliferation on the United States and accusing Washington of using its weapons to threaten and blackmail other nations.

The public bluster had no effect on diplomatic moves in the region. In Seoul, the South Korean government announced that it had agreed with Pyongyang to hold Cabinet-level talks on Jan. 21-24. The confrontation over the North’s nuclear weapons programs was expected to be on the agenda.

Tensions on the peninsula have been rising since North Korea admitted in October to having a secret nuclear program.

Last week the communist regime announced its withdrawal from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and threatened to begin testing missiles again.

South Korean officials have said they would use all inter-Korean contacts to persuade North Korea to give up its nuclear ambitions. The upcoming talks would be the ninth round the two countries have had since a North-South summit in June 2000 and the first since October.

While the North has maintained its antagonistic stance against the United States, it has not made any alarming moves on the ground.

The U.S. military has spotted increased patrols by North Korean soldiers over the past week in one area of the Demilitarized Zone dividing the Korean Peninsula, said Lt. Col. Matthew Margotta, who commands a combined battalion of U.S. and South Korean soldiers.

But the moves in the 2 1/2-mile-wide, 156-mile-long DMZ were “not alarming, just unusual,” and were probably “triggered by a heightening of tensions,” Margotta said.

The North Koreans have also occupied a guard tower in the DMZ that hadn’t been used in years, he said.

In a speech earlier in the week at the Yongsan command headquarters for U.S. troops in South Korea,

President-elect Roh Moo-hyun called the U.S.-South Korean alliance the “driving force” for security in the region.

“We can never accept North Korea’s nuclear weapons program,” Roh said, calling for an international diplomatic effort to defuse the standoff. “The South Korean-U.S. alliance should be the basis for this effort,” he said.

The United States keeps 37,000 troops based in South Korea, and the accidental killing of two teenage girls by American GIs driving a military vehicle has increased calls that the force be scaled down.

In Beijing, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly went into talks at the Chinese Foreign Ministry saying he was optimistic about international efforts to peacefully resolve the confrontation.

China has offered to host negotiations between the United States and North Korea.

“I’m very reassured,” said Kelly, who arrived from Seoul on Tuesday night. “We have to keep talking with each other to make sure that things are done in the best possible way.”

On Wednesday, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Mohamed ElBaradei, urged Russia to become involved in the diplomatic efforts, saying Moscow could play a “vitally important role.”

North Korea has been issuing daily diatribes against the United States through its state-run media. Pyongyang’s KCNA news agency rejected international concern over its nuclear programs and said nuclear proliferation was started by the United States.

“In 1945, the U.S. produced three A-bombs and tested one of them in its mainland and dropped the other two on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, inflicting nuclear holocaust on the Japanese for the first time in human history,” the dispatch said.

The United States and other countries are now trying to shift the blame to North Korea and pressuring it to rejoin the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, said the report, monitored in Seoul.

As part of its efforts, Washington has taken a more conciliatory approach.

President Bush said on Tuesday that he would consider reviving a proposal offering substantial economic benefits for North Korea if it agrees to dismantle its nuclear weapons facilities.

The administration had been prepared to make such an offer last year but withdrew it after learning that the North Koreans had initiated a uranium-based nuclear weapons program.

In talks earlier this week in Seoul, Kelly indicated the United States might help North Korea meet its energy needs if the nuclear issue is resolved.

Class action lawsuit filed against Westar

TOPEKA (AP)—A class-action lawsuit filed Wednesday against Westar Energy Inc. charges the company and its top executives with knowingly issuing false and misleading statements about the company’s finances.

The lawsuit in U.S. District Court in Topeka, charges that those statements costs hundreds or thousands of people to lose money because Westar securities sold at artificially high prices.

The class represented in the lawsuit includes anyone who bought Westar stock between March 30, 2001 and Dec. 26, 2002.

The complaint was filed on behalf of Howard B. Kahn, whose hometown was not available. It was filed by attorneys with Swanson Midgley of Kansas City, Mo.; Schiffrin & Barroway, of Bala Cynwyd, Pa.; and Cauley Geller Bowman & Coates of Little Rock, Ark.

The complaint names the company, as well as James Haines, current director, chief executive officer and president; David Wittig, former chairman of the board, CEO and president; James Martin, former senior vice president; and Paul Geist, current senior vice president and chief financial officer.

The suit charges that the defendants violated the Securities Exchange Act by issuing the misleading or false statements involving its dealings with Cleco Corp., and earnings for Protection One, a security alarm firm owned primarily by Westar.

The complaint said the statements artificially inflated the price of Westar’s securities, and that each of the defendants knew about the deception.

A spokeswoman for Westar, Karla Olsen, said the company would have no statement on the lawsuit Wednesday.

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