

North Korea restarts nuclear plant: US

REUTERS, Seoul/Washington

North Korea has restarted the reactor at the heart of its suspected drive for nuclear weapons, further raising the stakes in its diplomatic showdown with the United States, US officials said.

Activating the small research reactor at Yongbyon, the communist North's latest provocative step in a crisis that erupted last year, comes as Washington prepares for war with Iraq and South Korea forms a new government.

"I think this is another example of the regime of North Korea taking escalatory actions in order to gain concessions," said Sean McCormack, the White House National Security Council spokesman. "We seek a peaceful diplomatic solution, but all options remain on the table."

US officials said there were no signs that North Korea had reactivated its nuclear fuel reprocessing plant, which would be of even greater concern because it would take the North a step closer to adding to the two nuclear bombs it is believed to have.

"Part of this demonstrates their desire to continue their nuclear weapons program and it's another effort to apply pressure on the

United States," another US official said.

Analysts in Seoul saw the move as yet another North Korean attempt to shake new President Roh Moo-hyun, who has been at odds with Washington over how to deal with the crisis. The North upstaged Roh's inauguration Tuesday by firing a short-range missile into the Sea of Japan.

In Beijing, China and Russia -- friends of North Korea and permanent members of the UN Security Council -- issued a joint communique promising to push for dialogue between the United States and North Korea to resolve the nuclear crisis.

"China and Russia will try the best to push for a dialogue between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the United States," China's Xinhua news agency quoted a statement by the two countries' foreign ministers as saying.

Reaction in Seoul to North Korea's latest move was muted, as Roh and his new prime minister finalized their cabinet.

"We are trying to find out more about it," said a South Korean government source, adding that Seoul would hold consultations with Japan and the United States.

"Even in the United States it is still at the level of intelligence, very raw intelligence," the source added.

In Tokyo, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi urged a calm and cautious response while the news was being analysed.

"We have received information that it has been restarted. We don't know yet to what degree," Koizumi told reporters.

A US official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the intelligence was obtained through satellite photographs.

New Prime Minister Goh Kun said South Korea would move to tackle what he said was a "serious threat to world peace" as soon as Roh named his cabinet Thursday.

"The new government's primary task will be the peaceful resolution of the North Korea nuclear issues while strengthening the South Korea-US alliance," Goh told reporters.

Roh, who has limited foreign policy experience, wants to avoid using military force against the North and has said that causing the impoverished communist state to collapse would bring dire consequences to the South.

Pakistan likely to back US war on Iraq

AFP, Washington

Pakistan has signalled to the United States that it will back a new resolution on disarming Iraq, a stance that could help swing wavering votes on the UN Security Council. The Los Angeles Times reported Thursday.

"We are very good allies of the United States and value our relationship and want to see that blossom," a senior Pakistani official told The Times. "The issue of Iraq will not become a problem between us."

Pakistan's decision came as Mexico also indicated its potential backing, and US officials said that other key countries, including Angola and Guinea, are gravitating to the American side, the report said.

With Bulgaria firmly in the US camp, that could leave the three co-sponsors of the resolution -- the United States, Britain and Spain -- just one short of the nine votes they need to win passage, the paper pointed out.

US diplomats hope that building up a bloc of support will put pressure on France and Russia not to veto the resolution, which would allow the use of force against Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, The Times said.

Besides adding an important vote, Pakistan's decision could prevent any move to create a bloc among the 10 rotating members of the council, according to the report.

Iraq war 'can and should be avoided': Russia, China

No sign of Saddam's decision to disarm: Blix

REUTERS, Beijing

China and Russia said on Thursday war against Iraq "can and should be avoided" and pledged to do their utmost to bring the United States and North Korea into talks to resolve the crisis over Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions.

"Both sides reiterate their determination to render their full efforts for promoting a political solution to the Iraqi issue," Xinhua quoted a joint communique issued by the two countries' foreign ministers as saying.

It noted the international community had called for all measures to avoid war. "Such aspiration should be respected," Xinhua quoted the communique as saying.

"The two sides advocate to resolve the Iraqi crisis through political and diplomatic means" and urged more weapons inspections, it said.

Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov's visit came on the heels of a visit this week by Secretary of State Colin Powell, who urged China to use its influence in Pyongyang and



PHOTO: AFP
Russian President Vladimir Putin (R) gives a press conference with German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder (L) on Wednesday following their talks at the Kremlin in Moscow. The two leaders confirmed their position of reaching a peaceful solution to the Iraq crisis.

stressed Washington's desire for swift action on Iraq.

Publicly, Russia and China -- both permanent veto-holding members of the UN Security Council -- appear unified on Iraq. Both have reiterated they oppose war and want the UN inspectors to have more time.

AP adds: Iraq still hasn't committed to disarming, the chief UN inspector said, but he appeared to push for continued weapons inspections ahead of a debate by a divided Security Council on a US draft resolution authorising war against Saddam Hussein.

The council on Thursday will also discuss a French-Russian-German proposal aiming to stave off war and prolong inspections at least until July 1.

President Bush said Wednesday that while the Iraqi regime still has time to avoid war, US troops are ready for battle. He called on allies for their support.

"The danger posed by Saddam Hussein and his weapons cannot be ignored or wished away," Bush said in Washington.



PHOTO: AFP
South Korean new Prime Minister Goh Kun (R) receives his appointment letter from President Roh Moo-hyun (L), on Thursday at the presidential Blue House. South Korea's opposition-controlled parliament endorsed Goh Kun, late Wednesday after a day-long wrangle which forced the new leader to spend his first full day in office without a cabinet.

Roh unveils new cabinet

AFP, Seoul

South Korea's new President Roh Moo-hyun appointed a university professor with no government experience as his foreign minister and a crusading woman civil rights lawyer to head the justice ministry as he unveiled a reformist cabinet here Thursday.

Yoon Young-Kwan, 52, a Seoul National University (SNU) professor of international relations, was appointed foreign minister after serving in Roh's transition team as foreign policy chief.

Roh, 56, sworn in two days ago, named a woman lawyer Kang Gum-Sil to lead the male-dominated Justice Ministry for the first time.

"The cabinet line-up is reform-oriented," the president said. "I recruited those who I believed to be best for continued reforms."

Hollywood leads phone, fax assault on White House to prevent war

AFP, Los Angeles

A battalion of Hollywood stars on Wednesday led an electronic assault against the White House and Congress in a bid to thwart plans for a war with Iraq, organisers said.

The luminaries, including Martin Sheen, who plays the US president in the hit series "The West Wing," and Anjelica Huston, worked their phones, faxes and e-mails in a bid to flood the US leadership with anti-war messages.

"The 'virtual march' on Washington is well underway and hundreds of thousands of people have been calling the White House and Congress, where lines have been busy all day," said organisers' spokeswoman Michelle Mulkey.

Anti-war protesters bombarded the White House and every member of US senator with calls, faxes and e-mails in a bid to keep their lines and computers jammed between 9:00am (1400 GMT) and 5:00 pm (2200 GMT).

Sheen, Huston and other celebrities including actor James Cromwell, Mike Farrell and actress Tyne Daley were playing their part in overwhelming lawmakers and the administration of President George W. Bush with messages.

Organisers of the protest, a group dubbed "Artists United Without War," say that more than 10 million Americans have been asked to write, phone or fax their leaders to halt any attack on Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

Spire, memorial pit chosen for WTC site

REUTERS, New York

A towering spire designed by renowned architect Daniel Libeskind that would be among the world's tallest structures was selected on Wednesday to restore New York's skyline where the World Trade Centre once stood, an official source familiar with the decision said.

The source said New York officials chose Libeskind's design concept for the 16-acre site ahead of other finalist teams of New York architects led by Rafael Vinoly and Frederic Schwartz, who envisaged a pair of matching lattice-work buildings also taller than the twin towers destroyed in the Sept. 11, 2001 hijacked plane attacks.

"It's Libeskind. Both parties have been notified," said the source, who asked not to be identified, after



meetings on Wednesday of the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, a state, city and civic agency established to oversee redevelopment of the area at the heart of one of the world's most important financial districts.

Seoul, Washington to talk relocation of US troops

AFP, Seoul

The United States and South Korea hold talks Thursday on the future role of US troops here and the possible relocation of key military bases, officials said.

"The alliance between South Korea and the United States tops the agenda at today's policy consultations. Discussion will be made, too, on the possible relocation of US forces here," a Defense Ministry official said.

The talks start later Thursday between Richard Lawless, US deputy assistant secretary of defence for East Asia and the Pacific, and Cha Young-woo, head of the Defence Ministry's policy department, the official said.

US troops have been welcomed here as the guardians of peace for five decades since they fought

alongside South Korea to repel North Korean and Chinese forces during the 1950-53 Korean War.

The perception, however, has changed dramatically due to resentment stoked by the deaths of two girls killed in a road accident by a US military vehicle last year and Washington's hard line towards North Korea during the nuclear standoff.

A recent survey by the JoongAng Ilbo newspaper in Seoul showed that a majority of South Koreans want US troops out of South Korea, or their presence reduced.

One irritant between the United States and many South Koreans is the location of the US military headquarters at Yongsan on a sprawling compound of prime real estate in central Seoul.

South Korean officials say relocating US bases in South Korea

requires a long-term master plan on cost and weapons requirements.

Under a mutual defence pact, South Korea currently pays 472 million dollars in annual contributions, along with land, labour and logistics support, according to defence ministry statistics.

Washington spends far more to keep some 37,000 US troops, which have 81 army units, 12 air force units and two naval facilities in South Korea.

The 50-year-old relationship between South Korea and the United States has been damaged by anti-US protests spreading beyond radical groups normally associated with opposition to the US alliance.

Anti-US demonstrations have subsided this year, with the spotlight focusing on North Korea's nuclear ambitions.

VHP vows to build Ram temple on train attack anniversary

AFP, Ahmedabad

Hindu hardliners prayed together here Thursday one year after a train attack that set off deadly Hindu-Muslim riots, using the anniversary to step up a campaign to build a controversial temple over the ruins of a mosque.

Right-wing groups set up commemoration ceremonies at 800 places across the western state of Gujarat, where one year later thousands remain displaced from India's worst communal bloodshed in a decade.

Many in the Muslim community, the main target of the riots, chose to stay indoors on the sensitive anniversary. But there was no visible increase in security in the state, and police said there were no reports of violence.

INS ineffective at deporting illegals

REUTERS, Washington

The US Immigration and Naturalisation Service is ineffective at deporting illegal aliens and fails to properly expel foreigners who may include potential terrorists, a Justice Department report said on Wednesday.

A report by the department's inspector general found that only 13 percent of all illegal aliens who have been ordered out of the country but have not been detained, have actually left.

By contrast, the INS has removed almost 94 percent of those illegal aliens with "final removal orders" who are being held in the agency's custody.

The report said that as of June 2002 about 355,000 illegal aliens not in INS custody but who had been

ordered out of the country had failed to leave.

In its review, the inspector general examined three subgroups of aliens and found the INS was also ineffective at expelling potential high-risk groups of illegal aliens.

For example, only six percent of illegal foreigners from countries identified by the United States as "sponsors of terrorism" who were not under arrest but had been ordered deported, ever left.

The INS also expelled just three percent of the illegal aliens whose applications for asylum in the United States had been denied. "The low removal rate for asylum seekers is a concern because this group may include potential terrorists who threaten our national security," the report said.

62 pc turnout in polls in 4 Indian states

AFP, Guwahati

Millions of people voted during polls Wednesday in four state legislatures in India despite a spate of violent attacks by militants, electoral officials said.

India's Election Commission citing initial reports said 62 percent of the 8.31 million voters turned out to vote in the far-eastern states of Tripura, Meghalaya and Nagaland and in the Himalayan province of Himachal Pradesh.

The vote is seen as a litmus test of popularity of the country's largest political groups ahead of parliamentary elections next year.

While voting in Himachal Pradesh passed off peacefully, the commission reported random poll-related violence in Nagaland, where Naga tribal insurgents are on the verge of giving up a five-decade-long struggle for independence from

Indian rule.

Police raided a militant hideout in the state capital Kohima as voting got underway, arresting three members of the separatist National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) and shooting dead another.

According to police, the group was planning to attack polling stations.

Police also reported other incidents of violence in the state.

"NSCN (Isak-Muivah) cadres opened fire on security forces in two places although we managed to repulse the attack," Nagaland Additional Police Chief J. Changkija told AFP by telephone from Kohima.

At least 25 ruling Congress workers were kidnapped at gunpoint by NSCN rebels early Wednesday, 14 of them in the constituency of Chief Minister S.C. Jamir in Mokokchung district.

Saddam orders salary cuts for overweight officials

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's President Saddam Hussein on Wednesday issued decrees cutting in half the salaries of overweight officials and officers, while also penalising members of the ruling Baath Party caught gambling.

Any government official and armed forces officer who fails the "annual fitness check-up... will have his salary, allocations as well as bonuses on religious and national holidays halved," said one decree.

Baath Party members caught "gambling with the intention of making money" will be jailed for three years, warned another decree.

Gamblers will lose their party memberships and any position they hold in the government, the armed forces, intelligence services, judiciary, educational institutions and parliament.

As US-led troops heavily deploy at Iraq's doorstep ahead of a possible war, Saddam has repeatedly urged his armed forces to watch out for physical fitness and train for better performance.



PHOTO: AFP
South Korean protesters reflect sunrays onto the US embassy during an anti-war demonstration in Seoul on Thursday. US President George W. Bush, offering new justification for war in Iraq, said Wednesday that "ending this direct and growing threat" from Iraqi President Saddam Hussein would pave the way for peace in the Middle East and inspire democracy throughout the Arab world.