



South Koreans watch a television broadcasting North Korea's nuclear test at a railway station in Seoul yesterday. Defying worldwide appeals and threats of sanctions, North Korea announced it had carried out its first nuclear weapons test and called it a "historic event."

## US, Japan to take 'decisive action' against N Korea

### Nuke test fans fears in Asia

AFP, AP, Seoul

The United States and Japan agreed Monday to take "decisive action" against North Korea at the United Nations Security Council following the communist state's announcement it had conducted a nuclear test.

US President George W Bush and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe reached the agreement in a 15-minute telephone conversation, the Japanese embassy in Seoul said in a press release.

Abe, who took office last month, arrived here from Beijing on the last leg of a two-day tour aimed at mending strained relations with his two Asian neighbours.

Bush and Abe viewed Pyongyang's announcement as "categorically unacceptable", a "grave threat to peace and stability in the international community", and a "serious challenge to the (nuclear)

non-proliferation regime," the statement said.

The two leaders also agreed that the "US deterrence based on the Japan-US alliance is unshakeable," it added.

The spectre of an Asian atomic arms race loomed over the region yesterday after communist North Korea shocked its neighbours by announcing it conducted its first-ever nuclear test.

Raising the nuclear stakes from Pyongyang to Tokyo would put some of the world's biggest cities in the shadow of atomic weapons. It might also put nuclear arms in the hands of previously reluctant powers like South Korea or Taiwan.

On a wider scale, North Korea's dabbling with atomic weapons could spur other nuclear powers, including the United States, India or China, to resume their own nuclear testing, a move that raises the risk of proliferation.

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"If the test was true, it will severely endanger not only Northeast Asia but also the world stability," Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Aso said.

Officials from Washington to Seoul had warned of an arms race even before North Korea said it fulfilled its threat to join the elite club of nuclear powers.

South Korea fears Japan would be the first to go nuclear, triggering countermoves by suspicious Asian neighbours in a cascade that upends regional security.

"There's no equalizer like the bomb," said Peter Beck, head of the Seoul office of the International Crisis Group think tank. "It's safe to say it will lead to an arms race will push all the governments in the region to increase defence spending."

Defence Secretary Donald H Rumsfeld warned Thursday that allowing North Korea to test a bomb

would provoke far-reaching fallout.

"The lack of cohesion and the inability to marshal sufficient leverage to prevent North Korea from proceeding toward a nuclear programme... it will kind of lower the threshold, and other countries will step forward with it," Rumsfeld said.

The current North Korean nuclear standoff dates to 2002, when the United States accused North Korea of conducting a secret nuclear programme in violation of a 1994 agreement.

North Korea announced Monday it had safely conducted an underground test, claiming the development "will contribute to defending the peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and in the area around it."

## Low possibility of radioactive contamination

REUTERS, Mumbai

Underground explosions are usually a safe option for testing nuclear devices and North Korea's test yesterday had apparently not caused any radioactive contamination, Indian atomic scientists said.

India and its neighbour and old rival Pakistan were the last countries to carry out nuclear tests when they conducted tit-for-tat explosions in May 1998.

The tests drew global condemnation and sanctions were imposed on both countries but the safety of the tests was never questioned, said the scientists who were closely involved with the programme.

Geological conditions at the test site and the design of the tunnels are crucial to preventing contamination from an explosion and initial reports indicated that no radioactivity had been monitored hours after Pyongyang's test, they said.

"Neighbours like Japan, (South) Korea and Taiwan all have excellent atmospheric radiation monitoring capability," said A Gopalakrishnan, former chief of India's Atomic Energy Regulatory Board.

## North Korea test more worrying than Indo-Pak blasts: Analysts

AFP, Islamabad

Eight years ago it was India and Pakistan who shocked the world with their underground atomic blasts, but North Korea's nuclear test yesterday is far more alarming, analysts said.

In May 1998 a South Asian apocalypse suddenly seemed a possibility after the two rival nations carried out tit-for-tat tests -- the last nuclear explosions until now.

News bulletins at the time showed footage of a barren yellow mountain in remote southwestern Pakistan shuddering with the sheer force of simultaneous detonations deep below the earth.

Yet the situation now is more serious, analysts said, particularly as Pyongyang may have learned lessons from Pakistan, whose disgraced nuclear hero provided North Korea with atomic secrets.

"I would say that this is much more significant," analyst and retired Pakistani Army General Talat Masood told AFP.

"In 1998 it was much more India-Pakistan specific, but the North Korean test means US nuclear hegemony in East Asia has col-

lapsed, the counter-proliferation policy by the US has collapsed and their axis of evil policy has collapsed," he said.

Mainly Hindu India carried out its first nuclear test in secret in 1974. It had already fought three wars with Muslim-majority Pakistan since independence from Britain and their subsequent partition in 1947.

In 1998 New Delhi followed up by detonating five warheads beneath the Rajasthan desert between May 11 and 13.

Pakistan came under huge international pressure not to follow suit but it exploded five bombs in Baluchistan province on May 28 and another two days later.

The two countries became the world's sixth and seventh declared nuclear powers respectively, while Pakistan also emerged as the only nation in the Islamic world with the bomb.

"It's a formidable challenge for a country after they have detonated," said analyst Masood. "There is fear of the unknown, as to how the world will react, what the consequences are, what the sanctions will be."

## 54 Taliban killed in clashes

### 5 Afghans die in bomb blast

AFP, Kabul

A bomb ripped through a government vehicle in eastern Afghanistan yesterday and killed five people while the army and police reported they had killed 54 militants in clashes at the weekend.

The remote-controlled bomb in eastern Nangarhar province destroyed a district's top three officials -- the chief of Khogyani district, his police commander and his intelligence chief.

A policeman and a passer-by were also killed. Nangarhar police spokesman Ghafoor Khan said.

The officials were travelling to a village to visit a school that the Taliban-led militants torched late Sunday, Khan said.

Purported Taliban spokesman Yousuf Ahmadi claimed responsibility for the attack, saying his Taliban fighters detonated the bomb which was planted on a road.

The army meanwhile reported it had killed 30 "enemy elements" on Saturday in an operation with foreign troops in southern Uruzgan province. Police put the toll at 20.

## N Korean N-test pushes Japan down military path

AFP, Tokyo

North Korea's announcement yesterday that it has tested a nuclear bomb is set to push Japan to expand its own military and stir debate on what was once the ultimate taboo of developing atomic weapons itself.

The test comes with Japan in the midst of expanding its defence posture, 60 years after it was defeated in World War II and forced by the United States to renounce the right to a military.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who took office just two weeks ago, is a sworn hawk on North Korea who has long supported a larger role for Japan's military alongside its ally the United States.

"We need to make a stern response and North Korea will be responsible for all the consequences," Abe said Monday as he visited Seoul "Japan for its part will immediately start studying a response with stern measures."

Analysts expect North Korea's test to boost the hand of Abe, who wants to rewrite the pacifist 1947

constitution and allow Japanese troops to engage in overseas operations alongside allies.

Washington currently protects Japan by treaty as the country was stripped of its right to maintain an armed force after defeat in World War II.

But after North Korea in 1998 fired a missile over Japan's main island, Japan and the United States started working in earnest on a missile shield.

Abe said Monday that Japan would step up cooperation with the United States, including on missile defence, "to maintain the safety of the Japanese country and people."

The United States stationed its first surface-to-air Patriot missiles in Japan after North Korea in July test-fired seven missiles in Japan's direction.

Despite its pacifism and US guarantees to protect Japan, the country now has around 240,000 troops on active duty and an annual military budget of 4.81 trillion yen (41.6 billion dollars).



Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (R) is greeted by Congress Party president and UPA government chairperson Sonia Gandhi (L) and Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee (C) in New Delhi yesterday before his departure for a two nation tour of Britain and Finland. Trade and terrorism will dominate Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's talks with the leaders of Britain and the European Union during the tour.



People are transported in a boat as others tread through the floodwaters on the main street in Anghong province north of Bangkok Sunday. Severe flooding has affected almost 1.8 million people in over 40 Thai provinces, killing 37 people and leaving nearly 140,000 suffering from water-borne diseases, officials said Monday.

## Arms remain sticking point in Nepal talks

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepal's Maoist rebels and the government may have edged closer to a deal on the future of the monarchy but the question of disarming the guerrillas remains a sticking point in peace talks, negotiators said yesterday.

Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala and leaders of the ruling seven-party alliance met Maoist chief Prachanda on Sunday, their first meeting in nearly four months, in a bid to rescue a peace process which had been in danger of stalling.

Both sides said the meeting was "highly positive" and they are due to meet again on Tuesday.

The government and rebels have observed a ceasefire since May to bring a halt to a decade-old insurgency in which around 13,000 people have been killed.

The government has offered to bring the rebels into an interim administration and agreed to a central rebel demand -- that elections should be held for a special assembly to prepare a new constitution and decide the future of the monarchy.

On Sunday, the two sides agreed that those elections should be held by June 2007, said rebel negotiator Baburam Bhattarai, the number two to Prachanda.

"Except this, there was no consensus on the main political agenda including the arms," Bhattarai told Reuters.

The Maoists see the constituent assembly elections as a mechanism to achieve their long-standing goal -- the abolition of the monarchy and establishment of a republic.