

13 June 2009 09:19 UK

North Korea in plutonium threat



Image grab of North Korean TV showing apparent rocket launch
Pyongyang has recently carried out nuclear tests and rocket launches

North Korea said it will "weaponise" its plutonium stocks amid threats to take military action over United Nations sanctions, state media said.

Pyongyang has for the first time confirmed it is seeking to enrich uranium in efforts to develop nuclear weapons, it said.

North Korea would view any US-led attempts to "blockade" it as an "act of war", the Associated Press (AP) said.

It follows a toughening of UN sanctions against the communist state.

The warning from North Korea's foreign ministry was carried by Pyongyang's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) on Saturday.

'Unacceptable behaviour'

On Friday, the United Nations Security Council voted unanimously to impose tougher sanctions on communist North Korea, after its nuclear test on 25 May.

The North also tested a rocket thought to be capable of carrying a warhead, though Pyongyang said it was designed to carry a satellite.

The UN sanctions include the inspection of North Korean ships, a wider ban on arms sales and other financial measures.

The US deputy ambassador at the UN, Rosemary DiCarlo, said the new vote was a strong and united response to North Korea's "unacceptable behaviour".

The North Korean foreign ministry statement said: "Firstly, all plutonium to be extracted will be weaponised. One third of used fuel rods have so far been reprocessed.

"Secondly, we will start uranium enrichment," the statement added.

South Korean troops, 12 June 2009

The nuclear fuel cycle

The BBC's John Sudworth in Seoul said the admission that Pyongyang was trying to enrich uranium was worrying, as the processing could take place in a smaller reactor and was easier to hide.

Korea analyst Aidan Foster Carter told the BBC Pyongyang's process was "out of control" and that nothing seemed able to persuade North Korea to stop its nuclear ambitions - neither sanctions nor financial incentives.

He said the nuclear stand-off may be part of internal ructions as Pyongyang's leader Kim Jong-il decides which of his three sons will take over from him.

Handful of weapons

North Korea is thought to possess enough reprocessed plutonium for between six and eight nuclear weapons.

However, analysts say Pyongyang has not yet mastered the technology to make a nuclear warhead small enough to place on a missile.

Pyongyang has stated its nuclear weapons programme is purely a defensive measure to protect it against a US attack.

Washington has said it does not intend to attack the North, and is concerned Pyongyang's nuclear knowledge could be passed to other states.

13 June 2009 19:38 UK

US condemns North Korean threat



South Korean soldier observes the border, 13 June, 2009

Tensions are high on border between the two Koreas

North Korea's threat to "weaponise" its plutonium stocks is "provocative" and "deeply regrettable", US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton says.

She said the move had been denounced around the world and would isolate North Korea's government further.

The North said it would start enriching uranium and use the plutonium for nuclear weapons hours after a UN vote for tough new sanctions against it.

The US would vigorously enforce the new sanctions, Mrs Clinton said.

Speaking during a visit to Canada, she said the latest UN moves provided the tools needed for "to take appropriate action" against North Korea.

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16 June 2009 02:33 UK

US confirms N Korea nuclear test



A North Korean rally against UN sanctions in Pyongyang, 15 June 2009
Tens of thousands rallied in Pyongyang against UN sanctions

The US has confirmed a "probable" nuclear test carried out by North Korea last month.

The explosion yielded several kilotons, more powerful than North Korea's first nuclear test in 2006, officials said.

It was the United States first official comment on the nature of the May 25 underground test.

The UN Security Council extended sanctions against North Korea last week in response to the test - including the inspection of North Korean ships.

In its confirmation of the test, the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence said "North Korea probably conducted an underground nuclear explosion in the vicinity of Punggye" on 25 May.

Earlier on Monday, tens of thousands of people rallied in the North Korean capital, Pyongyang, against the UN resolution to impose sanctions, state media reported.

Following the resolution the North said it would start enriching uranium and use the plutonium for nuclear weapons.

The US strongly condemned the threat.

North Koreans have made nuclear progress, experts say

- * Story Highlights
- * Country's 2006 test yielded half-kiloton blast; blast in May was up to 4 kilotons
- * Director of national intelligence says analysts are still investigating
- * North Koreans may be preparing for another nuclear test, official says

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By Pam Benson
CNN National Security Producer
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WASHINGTON (CNN) -- The U.S. intelligence community believes that North Korea tested a nuclear device last month with an explosive yield of several kilotons, considerably more powerful than its first test nearly three years ago.

In a brief statement, the office of Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair said, "The U.S. Intelligence Community assesses that North Korea probably conducted an underground nuclear explosion in the vicinity of P'unggye on May 25, 2009. The explosion yield was approximately a few kilotons. Analysis of the event continues."

May's nuclear test was the second conducted by the North Koreans. The first in October 2006 had a yield of approximately a half-kiloton. At the time, U.S. officials and independent experts considered the test somewhat of a failure.

U.S. and international nuclear experts had estimated that the latest test was in the 3- to 4-kiloton range. Former nuclear weapons inspector David Albright, the director of the Institute for Science and International Security, said the test shows that the North Koreans are "pushing their program along" and that they have "made progress."

By comparison, the first atomic bombs developed by the United States produced an explosion equivalent to about 19 kilotons, or 19,000 tons of TNT, according to the U.S. Air Force. The U.S. atomic bombs dropped on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 each generated explosions of more than 15 kilotons of TNT.

Don't Miss

- * Defiant North Korea 'to weaponize plutonium'
- * N. Korea may be preparing for new nuclear test
- * Envoy: N. Korea claims on U.S. aggression 'groundless'

A U.S. official said last week that there are indications the North Koreans "may be preparing" for another nuclear test. Albright said further testing could "significantly advance [North Korea's] nuclear weapons craft."

Over the past several months, North Korea has also tested a number of short-, medium- and long-range missiles. The U.S. official said North Korea is continuing to try to improve its technology on the full range of weapons.

"The more you conduct tests, the more you learn," said the official.