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N Korea 'reprocessing fuel rods'

North Korea has started to reprocess spent fuel rods at its nuclear plant, says the country's state media.

The reprocessing is a possible move towards producing weapons grade plutonium and comes after Pyongyang's launch of a long-range rocket in April.

Earlier, the UN Security Council imposed sanctions on three North Korean companies in response to the launch.

Pyongyang said it would ignore the sanctions, describing them as "a wanton violation of the UN charter".

"The reprocessing of spent fuel rods from the pilot atomic power plant began as declared in the Foreign Ministry statement dated April 14," North Korea's Central News Agency (KCNA) quoted a Foreign Ministry official as saying.

That was the date that Pyongyang announced it was pulling out of talks on its nuclear programme and would restart its Yongbyon reactor.

The official said the reprocessing would "contribute to bolstering the nuclear deterrence for self-defence in every way to cope with the increasing military threats from the hostile forces".

Assets freeze

5MW(e) reactor at Yongbyon ((Satellite image from 2006)

Satellite view of nuclear site

Pyongyang's announcement came only hours after the UN imposed sanctions on three companies it said had supported North Korea's controversial rocket launch.

The North says the launch put a satellite in orbit broadcasting patriotic songs, but critics say it was a long-range missile test that crashed into the Pacific.

The sanctions mark the first concrete steps against Pyongyang since the UN officially condemned the launch.

The head of the UN's Sanction Committee, Turkish ambassador Baki Ilkin, said the committee had "agreed to update a lengthy list of items, materials, equipment, goods and technology, whose import to and export from the DPRK [Democratic People's Republic of Korea] are prohibited".

"This update includes some of the latest technologies relevant to ballistic missile programmes," he said.

Mr Ilkin said the committee had also ruled that three companies be subject to measures requiring nations that have dealings with them to freeze their assets.

The companies are the Korea Mining Development Trading Corp (KOMID), Korea Ryongbong General Corp and Tanchon Commercial Bank.

Several subsidiary firms are also believed to be affected by the sanctions.

'Step forward'

North Korea's Deputy UN Ambassador Pak Tok Hun said the decision was "a wanton violation of the United Nations charter".

NUCLEAR CRISIS

Feb 2007 - North Korea agrees to close its main nuclear reactor in exchange for fuel aid

June 2007 - North Korea shuts its main Yongbyon reactor

June 2008 - North Korea makes its long-awaited declaration of nuclear assets

Oct 2008 - The US removes North Korea from its list of countries which sponsor terrorism

Dec 2008 - Pyongyang slows work to dismantle its nuclear programme after a US decision to suspend energy aid

Jan 2009 - The North says it is scrapping all military and political deals with the South, accusing it of "hostile intent"

5 April 2009 - Pyongyang launches a rocket carrying what it says is a communications satellite

14 April 2009 - After criticism of the launch from the UN Security Council, North Korea vows to walk out of six-party talks

Engage, appease, oppose?

N Korea a problem for Obama

Timeline: North Korea

"It is the inalienable right of every nation and country to make peaceful use of outer space," he said.

"That is why we totally reject and do not recognise any sort of decision which has been made in the Security Council."

US diplomats said the new legally-binding sanctions were "a serious and credible response" to the launch.

British ambassador John Sawers said the committee's unanimous agreement was "a major step forward in terms of international action to disrupt and deter" North Korea's ballistic missile programme.

The UN Security Council council unanimously condemned North Korea's rocket launch on 13 April, saying it was a cover for a long-range missile test and as such

contravened a 2006 resolution banning such tests.

North Korea responded by saying it was pulling out of six party talks on its nuclear programme and would restart its partially-dismantled nuclear reactor at Yongbyon.

It also ordered UN nuclear monitors to leave the country.

The debate over sanctions has been complicated by opposition from Russia and China, a major trading partner, over how to respond to North Korea's actions.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has been in Pyongyang in an attempt to persuade the North to return to the nuclear talks.

Mr Lavrov told a news conference in Seoul earlier that sanctions were "not constructive".

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N Korea threatens nuclear tests

The interior of a cooling tower at Yongbyon (image from February 2008)

North Korea says it has resumed reprocessing fuel rods at Yongbyon

North Korea has threatened to carry out nuclear missile tests unless the UN Security Council apologises for its condemnation of a recent rocket launch.

Pyongyang said it would be compelled to take self-defence measures "including nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile tests" if no apology was made.

When North Korea launched its rocket on 5 April, the launch was seen by the US and others as a disguised missile test.

The UN denounced North Korea's actions and called for tighter sanctions.

Pyongyang has insisted it put a communications satellite in orbit, and said it would ignore the sanctions, describing them as "a wanton violation of the UN charter".

North Korea conducted its first and only nuclear test in October 2006.

The BBC's John Sudworth in Seoul says preparations for a second atomic test would cause serious international concern.

He says it would also confirm that North Korea is no longer taking part in the long-running international nuclear disarmament negotiations known as the six-party talks.

Backward step

North Korea's foreign ministry said the UN should apologise for "infringing" the country's sovereignty and retract "all its resolutions and decisions" against Pyongyang.

It also announced plans to build a light-water nuclear reactor, according to the statement carried by the official Korean Central News Agency.

Following the UN criticism, the North pulled out of international negotiations on its denuclearisation and ejected all monitors from the country.

Pyongyang has since announced that it has started reprocessing spent fuel rods at its Yongbyon nuclear plant.

The reprocessing is a possible move towards producing weapons-grade plutonium.

North Korea had partially dismantled its nuclear reactor under a deal agreed at international talks in early 2007, in which it was also promised fuel aid.

It 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.