

North Korea's halt of nuclear reactor suggests bid to obtain weapons-grade plutonium – report

Suspension of operations at Yongbyon complex points to reprocessing work for nuclear arms, South Korean government source quoted as saying

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- The nuclear complex in Yongbyon, North Korea, in 2008. Operations there have been suspended in what South Korea and the US believe could be a sign of work being done to obtain plutonium for nuclear weapons, a South Korean news report says. Photograph: Kyodo/Reuters
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North Korea has halted the nuclear reactor at its main atomic complex, probably to extract plutonium that could be used for weapons by reprocessing spent fuel rods, a South Korean news report has said, citing a government source.

The operation of the five-megawatt nuclear reactor at the Yongbyon nuclear complex has been suspended since late September, according to intelligence assessments by US and South Korean authorities, the report said.

“South Korea and the US believe this could be a sign of reprocessing work being done to obtain weapons-grade plutonium,” the Donga Ilbo newspaper on Thursday quoted a government source as saying.

Reprocessing of spent fuel rods removed from a nuclear reactor is a step taken before plutonium is extracted. The Yongbyon nuclear complex is the North’s main source of plutonium that it likely has used to build nuclear weapons.

North Korea has also operated uranium enrichment facilities, which is a separate source of material that could be used for nuclear weapons.

“The possibility of a nuclear test by North Korea is not ruled out,” Donga Ilbo quoted a senior government official as saying, without elaborating.

South Korea’s foreign ministry and defence ministry did not immediately comment on the report.

North Korea has previously halted the operation of the reactor before restarting it and public confirmation of the purpose of such a move – whether it is for maintenance or for fuel extraction – is usually unavailable.

The North’s leader, Kim Jong-un, vowed late last year to **ramp up the production of nuclear warheads**, calling for an “exponential increase” in the regime’s nuclear arsenal. The country also approved a new law authorising the pre-emptive use of nuclear weapons. In April, Pyongyang claimed to have **successfully tested a solid-fuel intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM)** for the first time.

North Korea claims itself a nuclear state but has kept secret how many nuclear weapons it may have built or deployed. Independent estimates of the North’s plutonium range as high as 70kg, which could be enough to build 20 or more weapons.

North Korea has conducted six underground nuclear tests and there have been concerns since last year that it may be about to conduct another test as part of a program to develop miniaturised nuclear warheads.