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SEOUL'S FM DISMISSES REPORTS OF POLICY DIFFERENCES BETWEEN S. KOREA, U. S.

BEIJING, Aug. 12

South Korea's Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon dismissed Friday reports of conflicts between Seoul and Washington about Pyongyang's peaceful use of nuclear energy.

"There are neither differences of opinion nor conflicts between South Korea and the U. S. regarding North Korea's rights to peaceful nuclear use," Ban told reporters after holding a closed-door meeting with his Chinese counterpart Li Jiaoxing here.

"I plan to hold an in-depth discussion on this matter with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and other senior officials in the United States."

Ban, who arrived in Beijing on Thursday for nuclear consultations with Chinese officials, is scheduled to fly to Washington next week for similar talks.

Ban and Li discussed follow-up measures to the recent round of the six-party talks on North Korea's nuclear weapons, focusing on ways to bridge the gap between North Korea and the U. S.

After entering a recess on Sunday after 13 days of laborious negotiations, the six-party talks, involving the U. S., China, Japan, Russia and the two Koreas, are expected to resume on the final week of this month.

A key sticking point is whether North Korea should be allowed to retain its right to the peaceful use of nuclear power.

The energy-starved communist country agreed to dismantle its weapons-related nuclear program in exchange for a security guarantee and economic benefits, but insisted on retaining a civilian nuclear program for power generation.

South Korea has expressed its support for ensuring Pyongyang's peaceful nuclear activities on condition of its return to the nuclear nonproliferation treaty and its acceptance of international inspection of its nuclear facilities.

However, Seoul's stated position was misunderstood to mean it unconditionally supported Pyongyang's peaceful nuclear use, South Korea's Foreign Ministry officials said.

The U. S. opposes North Korea keeping even civilian nuclear facilities out of proliferation concerns, citing its track record of using nuclear research facilities for

weapons development.

U. S. officials are also critical of the North's past history of breaching international nuclear accords, including one signed with South Korea in 1991 pledging to keep the peninsula nuclear-free.

The U. S. hopes that South Korea's offer of electricity aid would cancel out North Korea's energy-related nuclear demand.

Seoul has offered to supply North Korea with 2 million kilowatts of electricity beginning in 2008 if the country agrees to verifiably scrap its nuclear weapons program.

In his talks with Li, Ban also discussed the issue of Chinese President Hu Jintao's visit to South Korea while separately inviting Li to Seoul.