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I. United States

1. US Delegation DPRK Yongbyon Visit

The Guardian (Jonathan Watts, "US DELEGATION TO VISIT DPRK NUCLEAR PLANT," Beijing, 01/06/04) reported that hopes of a resolution of the nuclear standoff in the DPRK rose yesterday when Pyongyang offered to suspend atomic power activities and welcomed its first visiting US delegation since the crisis blew up more than a year ago. In a statement that drew rare praise from the Bush administration, the DPRK said it was ready to stop operating its nuclear power industry as well as testing and producing nuclear weapons, as a "bold concession" to its adversary. The visiting US delegation consists of former White House officials, retired academics and nuclear scientists on what they stressed was a private mission to improve understanding between the sides. But the composition of the group, which includes Jack Pritchard, a former member of George Bush's national security staff, suggests their visit could play an important role in bridging the gap between Washington and Pyongyang. Before their trip, media in the US said they would be the first foreigners allowed into the Yongbyon nuclear complex since international inspectors were removed a year ago. 2. ROK on 2nd Round DPRK Talks

Reuters ("S.KOREA, US SEE BETTER CLIMATE FOR N.KOREA TALKS," Seoul, 01/07/04) reported that ROK, US and Japanese officials on Wednesday suggested the DPRK's offer to freeze its nuclear program may help bring about a new round of talks ending on Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions. The DPRK's offer on Tuesday to suspend its nuclear power program as well as refrain from testing or making atomic bombs was more specific than its previous statements and appeared to inject some hope for a fresh six-way talks among the US, the PRC, the ROK, the DPRK, Japan and Russia. "This should be helpful in creating the atmosphere for a second round of talks," ROK Foreign Minister Yoon Young-kwan told a news conference. "I think it may show that North Korea may also be starting to show a will to somehow seek a breakthrough in the situation. I think it is a good thing," Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi told reporters in Tokyo. "Even though we haven't had a six-party meeting for some time, I expect that the prospects of having one are improving," Secretary of State Colin Powell told a news conference in Washington, saying there has been "a lot of work" among the six parties to prepare the way for a fresh round of talks. But he also injected a cautionary note, saying the DPRK offer to suspend its civilian and suspected military nuclear programs was not a breakthrough and that Washington wanted any fresh talks to have concrete results.

3. Powell on DPRK Nuclear Program Suspension

New York Times (Steven R. Weisman, "POWELL HAILS NORTH KOREA FOR NEW STEP," Washington, 01/07/04) reported that US Secretary of State Colin L. Powell on Tuesday labeled as "positive" the latest offer by the DPRK to suspend its nuclear programs as part of an overall nuclear agreement, saying that he hoped the offer would lead to more talks on the issue. Appearing at the State Department after a meeting with the foreign minister of Tunisia, Habib Ben Yahia, Powell said it was "interesting" that the DPRK had "in effect said they won't test and they implied they would give up all aspects of their nuclear program, not just weapons program." The secretary's comments were a response to the latest statement from the DPRK on the of nuclear weapons, issued earlier on Tuesday from the official Korean Central News Agency. Administration officials said the DPRK offer differed only slightly from a proposal put forward last month but said it was important to take note of it in order to encourage more cooperation. Powell's comments were described by an aide as reflecting the view that the DPRK had indeed gone a bit further than it had in the past by expressing willingness to suspend its nuclear energy programs, which many experts say are a front for weapons activities. In addition, the official said, Powell wanted to take note of what seemed to be a concession in order to lock it in at the next round of negotiating. "This is an interesting step on their part, a positive step," Powell said. "We hope that it will allow us to move more rapidly toward the six-party framework talks."

4. PRC on DPRK Uranium Processing

The Washington Post (Glenn Kessler, "PRC NOT CONVINCED OF DPRK URANIUM EFFORT," Beijing, 01/07/04) reported that PRC told Asian diplomats last week it is not convinced of US claims that the DPRK has a clandestine program to enrich uranium for use in nuclear weapons, according to US officials who have been briefed on the discussions. The previously unreported conversation -- raising doubts about the central element in the Bush administration's case against Pyongyang -- underscores how PRC and US aims appear to be diverging in the diplomatic effort to restrain the DPRK's nuclear ambitions. The DPRK yesterday announced what it called a "bold concession" of offering to freeze both its nuclear weapons production and its nuclear power facility as "first-phase measures" of a package deal that would call for the US to lift sanctions and provide energy aid. Asian and US officials said yesterday that both sides now appear willing to go into the talks without a joint statement agreed on in advance, even though there are concerns that an open-ended session could result in little movement by either side. Some US officials are worried that the PRC effort to

play down the revelations about the DPRK's uranium enrichment program suggests the PRC is preparing the diplomatic groundwork to merely freeze the nuclear facility at Yongbyon, while leaving aside the issue of nuclear enrichment. Last week, at a meeting in Seoul between PRC, ROK and Japanese officials on the DPRK crisis, one of the most senior PRC diplomats dealing with the issue declared the PRC did not believe the DPRK had a highly enriched uranium program, according to US officials who have been informed about the meeting by the Japanese. At the meeting, the PRC official, Fu Ying, and her Japanese counterpart, Mitoji Yabunaka, were discussing a possible freeze of North Korea's nuclear programs when Yabunaka noted it would be necessary to freeze both Yongbyon and the highly enriched uranium program. Fu responded that the DPRK has denied having an enrichment program, and that the PRC also did not believe that it had one. She added that the US government briefing provided to the PRC had not been sufficient to convince the PRC that the DPRK had such a program.

5. PRC Constitutional Law

Agence France-Presse ("CHINA TO DROP 'MARTIAL LAW' 15 YEARS AFTER TIANANMEN CRACKDOWN: REPORT," Beijing, 01/07/04) reported that the PRC will strike the term "martial law" from its constitution during an upcoming legislative session, 15 years after the military crackdown on unarmed pro-democracy protesters in Tiananmen Square. According to the Oriental Outlook weekly, the constitutional amendment will strip the standing committee of the National People's Congress (NPC) of the power to declare "martial law", and instead empower it to call a "state of emergency." The change comes 15 years after former PRC premier Li Peng invoked martial law to quell the 1989 Tiananmen protests, a move that was deemed unconstitutional in some quarters as Li had not sought NPC approval. "According to the Law on Martial Law, martial law can be implemented at times when state unity is seriously endangered, or in times of turmoil, rioting or chaos to security or social and public security when normal measures are not adequate to maintain social order," the report said. "However, a state of emergency is not only in response to social turmoil, but to many other eventualities including war, natural disaster, public health and economic crisis," it said.

6. PRC SARS Development

Agence France-Presse ("CHINA'S SARS PATIENT NEVER TOUCHED CIVET AS CONCERN MOUNTS OVER CULL," 01/07/04) reported that the PRC's first SARS patient for six months said he has never had contact with civet cats as concerns mount over a mass slaughter of the animals, which are suspected of spreading the disease. The 32-year-old television producer in Guangdong province said he did not know how he caught the pneumonia-like illness and had never eaten or touched the animals and had not been to wildlife markets recently. The patient, identified by his surname Luo, recalled only having thrown a baby mouse out of the window. "My colleague told the doctors about me and the mouse, hoping to help them find the source of my infection," Luo was quoted by Xinhua news agency as saying. He was declared fully recovered Tuesday and is expected to be discharged from hospital Thursday, after being hospitalized in late December. He was confirmed as having Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) Monday. Guangdong Wednesday continued its campaign to eradicate the weasel-like civets, confiscating them from farms, markets and restaurants after mainland and Hong Kong scientists found the animals, bred and sold as a culinary delicacy, had a similar coronavirus as Luo's SARS virus. So far, 2,443 animals have been drowned in disinfectant or liquefied in pressurized pots, the Xinkuaibao newspaper said Wednesday.

7. Cross-Straits Relations

Agence France-Presse ("TAIWAN TO EXPAND "MINI THREE LINKS" WITH CHINA," 01/07/04) reported that Taiwan is planning to broaden the scope of the existing "mini three links" with the PRC to ease growing calls for full direct cross-strait exchanges by local businessmen, a report here says. The move, expected to come into effect on March 1, would allow all Taiwanese businessmen in China to travel across the strait by way of the Taiwan-controlled islands of Kinmen and Matsu, the Commercial Times quoted unnamed sources as saying. The "mini three links," launched on January 2, 2001, refer to direct transport, commercial and postal links between Kinmen, Matsu and Penghu islands and the PRC's southeastern Fujian province. Current regulations only allow those investing in Fujian to travel in this way.

8. US Lieberman on US-Taiwan Relations

Agence France-Presse ("BUSH HAS 'TURNED HIS BACK ON TAIWAN' - US SENATOR LIEBERMAN ADVERTISEMENT," reported that US Senator Joseph Lieberman, who is seeking the Democratic presidential nomination, has blasted US President George W. Bush's approach to Taiwan, accusing the president of giving in to PRC pressure over the island. "The president turned his back on Taiwan," Lieberman said during a presidential debate in Des Moines, Iowa, in the run-up to the long string of primary nominating elections. "China is not a democracy; Taiwan is, and we have to stand with that rambunctious democracy," said the candidate who ran for vice president on the Democratic ticket in 2000. Last month, US President George W. Bush publicly rebuked Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian's controversial plan to hold a referendum to ask China to remove hundreds of ballistic missiles targeting the island. Taiwan has repeatedly assured Washington that the referendum has nothing to do with independence and is a symbol of Taiwan's full-fledged democracy. Lieberman, who represents the state of Connecticut, essentially agreed with Chen's position, arguing that the planned referendum "was not a declaration of independence by the Taiwanese." "This was a call for a referendum on whether the PRC should remove the missiles from across the Taiwan Straits," the senator said.

9. Japan Iraq Ground Troops Preparation

Financial Times (David Pilling, "JAPAN READIES GROUND TROOP DISPATCH TO IRAQ," Tokyo, 01/07/04) reported that Japan is expected to issue an order on Friday to send ground troops to Iraq signaling the determination of Junichiro Koizumi, prime minister, to forge ahead with the controversial deployment. An advance party will be sent to Samawah in southern Iraq as early as next week to survey conditions for the possible dispatch of 500 ground troops from next month. The timetable indicates Koizumi's desire to carry out his promise to George W. Bush, US president, to send troops as quickly as possible. An advance party of air force personnel was moved to Kuwait and Qatar in December. Koizumi may be keen to press ahead with the controversial dispatch to prevent debate over the issue from dominating upper house elections scheduled for July. Even so, political analysts have described the prime minister's action as a high-risk gamble that could go badly wrong if troops are killed. Soicihro Tahara, one of Japan's most influential television journalists, recently described Koizumi's pact with Bush as a "double suicide." A majority of the Japanese public is wary about sending ground troops before the security situation stabilizes. Some 40 per cent are opposed to a dispatch under any circumstances. Yasuhiro Nakasone, former prime minister, lent his support to Koizumi on Wednesday, saying troop deployment "marked a breakthrough in terms of security policy."

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