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I. NAPSNet

1. Six Party Talks

New York Times ("NORTH KOREA TALKS HIT A SIGNIFICANT OBSTACLE", 2006-12-21) reported that talks between the United States and DPRK hit a significant obstacle today, as diplomats said the two sides sharply disagreed over whether relaxing an American-led crackdown on the Pyongyang regime's financial transactions should be part of any deal to roll back its nuclear program. Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill said today that North Korean negotiators were determined to link the two issues, and that the United States is equally determined not to. The chief envoy of Japan, which is also taking part in talks along with South Korea, Russia and China, described the situation as "severe" and said that he saw "no prospects for an agreement." Chinese officials expressed frustration today with the apparent stalemate.

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2. DPRK Financial Sanctions

Joong Ang Ilbo ("FROZEN BANK ACCOUNTS HOLD $12 MILLION FROM HYUNDAI", 2006-12-21) reported that half of the $24 million in DPRK assets held in the frozen Banco Delta Asia accounts came from the Hyundai Group of the RO Korea. Sources told the JoongAng Ilbo that the DPRK will be able to access some of the frozen holdings next week, because the money had been proven "legitimate." A U.S. source who requested anonymity said yesterday the $12 million was a part of Hyundai Group's payments to the DPRK for inter-Korean businesses.

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3. Inter-Korean Economic Relations

Yonhap News Agency ("N KOREA RESUMES OFFICIAL WORK AT JOINT ECONOMIC OFFICE WITH S KOREA", 2006-12-21) reported that DPRK representatives to a joint economic office with the RO Korea have returned to work for the first time since their angry withdrawal earlier in the year following Seoul's suspension of economic assistance to the communist state. The joint office is located near the Koreas joint industrial complex in the communist state's border town of Kaesong. Seoul continues to withhold its economic assistance, which is mostly humanitarian aid in the forms of food and fertilizer, since then, but analysts believe the DPRK government officials' return to the joint committee may represent a heightened hope for improved relations between the two nations.

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4. Inter-Korean Energy

Yonhap News Agency ("SOUTH KOREA HOLDS CEREMONY TO CONNECT POWER CABLES WITH NORTH", 2006-12-21) reported that the ROK held a ceremony to connect power cables to the DPRK, which will provide up to 100,000 kW of electricity for ROK businesses operating at the Kaesong joint industrial complex. The ceremony was held inside the demilitarized zone (DMZ) to connect cables running across the heavily-fortified border to the industrial complex in Kaesong, committee officials said. The ceremony came at the end of a 51bn won (55m US dollar) construction project to set up electric power lines between the joint complex just north of the inter-Korean border and the ROK's Munsan, just south of the border, the Kaesong Industrial District Management Committee said in a press release. The country has only been able to supply 15,000 kW of electricity through utility poles, according to ROK officials of the joint committee, which includes four to five DPR Korean

representatives.

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5. DPRK Refugees

Agence France-Presse ("NORTH KOREANS SEEK ASYLUM IN SOUTH KOREAN EMBASSY", 2006-12-21) reported that two DPR Korean girls have sought asylum at the RO Korean embassy in Laos this week. The two girls, one aged 12 and the other 14, managed to enter the embassy while the five adults traveling with them, including the mother, another woman and a family of two sons and their father, were unable to enter. The Laos foreign ministry said it was checking the report. An ROK embassy spokesman declined to comment.

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6. ROK Missile Defense System

Chosun Ilbo ("S.KOREA PLANS AFFORDABLE MISSILE DEFENSE SHIELD", 2006-12-21) reported that an early warning radar system, Patriot Missiles and a command system will make up a planned Korea Air and Missile Defense or KAMD to protect the country from the DPRK's ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons. The KAMD system will have significant limits in terms of intercept capability, since it will only be able to target low-flying missiles. KAMD will not be part of the US-led missile shield, but pundits say the two will have to be linked somehow since the ROK will still depend on the US in detecting missiles as well as battle management and for the new command system known as C4I (command, communication, control, computer and intelligence).

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7. US-Japan Information Exchange

Kyodo ("JAPAN, U.S. TO EXCHANGE TOPOGRAPHIC DATA, EYE ON N. KOREA, CHINA", 2006-1--21) reported that Japan and the US plan to sign documents to exchange detailed topographic data on countries around the world, Japan-US relations sources said, in a move apparently aimed at sharing data on countries such as the DPRK and PRC. Japan and the US also plan to jointly gather such data. As part of general information exchanges so far, the US government had mainly provided military intelligence satellite images to Japan, while Japan had provided data collected through radio transmissions monitored by the Self-Defense Forces, but there had been no clear written accord on the practice.

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8. Japan Population Decline

BBC News ("JAPAN POPULATION 'SET TO PLUMMET'", 2006-12-21) reported that a dwindling birth rate is expected to cut Japan's population by 30% over the next 50 years, a survey by the government has said. The report says the current population of about 127m is projected to sink below 90m by 2055. By that date the proportion of the population aged above 65 is set to double to 40.5%.

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9. Yasukuni Shrine Issue

Reuters ("SHRINE IN JAPAN TO ITS WAR DEAD PLANS TO 'SOFTEN' SECTION ON CHINA", 2006-12-21) reported that the Japanese war shrine at the center of a long-running dispute between Japan and PRC has decided to soften the references to China in a war museum on its premises, a Japanese newspaper reported. "There is no mistake in the facts, but the expressions are such that some parts could be misunderstood, so we will substitute softer expressions," the newspaper quoted a person involved in the revisions as saying of the references to the PRC.

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10. PRC-Japan Chemical Weapons Disposal Efforts

Kyodo ("JAPAN, CHINA TO CREATE JOINT BODY ON ABANDONED CHEMICAL WEAPONS", 2006-12-21) reported that Japan and the PRC agreed to establish a joint body early next year to accelerate the collection and disposal of wartime chemical weapons left behind by the Imperial Japanese Army mainly in Jilin Province, northeastern PRC, Japanese Foreign Ministry officials said. The body is expected to build large-scale disposal facilities in Jilin's Haerbaling district where up to 400,000 shells -- the largest number of shells in one area -- are thought to have been buried, the officials said.

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11. UN on PRC Land Reform

Xinhua ("UN SAYS RURAL LAND REFORM URGENTLY NEEDED IN CHINA ", 2006-12-21) reported that the PRC urgently needs a new rural land ownership mechanism to guarantee farmers' legal rights and security, according to a UN-PRC project inked in Beijing on Dec. 20. Jointly launched by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the PRC government, the four-year project aims to revitalize rural PRC by addressing problems of property rights, local governance and the provision of public services.

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