

Policy Forum 04-20A: Kim Jong Il Should Read George Bush's Lips

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Kim Jong Il Should Read George Bush's Lips

PFO 04-20: April 30, 2004

Kim Jong Il Should Read George Bush's Lips

by Peter Hayes

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I. Introduction

This piece by Peter Hayes, Executive Director of the Nautilus Institute, argues that the recent offer by the United States to send assistance to North Korea to aid in the recovery of Ryongchon reveals a significant shift in US policy. Never before in the lead up to nuclear talks has the Bush Administration ever made a proactive offer to assist the DPRK. More importantly, Kim Jong Il must recognize this subtle yet profound shift, and not let the opportunity slip away.

[Map of Area Ryongchon](#) (also known as "Yongcheon")

Produced by [Telemorphic Maplicity](#).

II. Essay by Peter Hayes

"Kim Jong Il Should Read George Bush's Lips"

By Peter Hayes, Executive Director of the Nautilus Institute

It must be hard for Kim Jong Il to hear what George W. Bush said on April 26 about the gigantic explosion on April 22, 2004 at Ryongchon, that killed 161 people including 76 children, and injured 1,300 others.

Many loud sounds compete for Kim's attention: the firefights in Iraq, the trading of insults between US Presidential candidates over US foreign policy, the preparations for the May 12th round of working level talks in Beijing, negotiations with South Korea over delivery of millions of dollars of aid, and the follow-up to Kim's recent trip to China. Nonetheless, given the stakes, one might expect that Kim attends closely to what George Bush says about him or his country.

Even if Kim Jong Il reads Bush's lips, Kim may find it hard to listen. Bush, after all, is the same President who reportedly loathes Kim and views him as a political pygmy.

That would be a big mistake. The fine print in the official American response to the explosion at Ryongchon reveals a significant shift in US policy. Never before in the lead up to nuclear talks has the Bush Administration made a proactive offer to assist the DPRK-in this case, before the DPRK lifts a finger to disarm (let alone simultaneously, as demanded by the DPRK).

The official US contribution of \$100,000 to the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) fund to respond to humanitarian needs in Ryongchon pales when compared with the nearly \$30 million provided mostly by South Korea, but also by Russia, China, Australia, and many others including international public and private agencies.

But the DPRK foreign affairs officials reporting to Kim may not have highlighted the most significant phrase in the White House April 26, 2004 statement on the railway disaster: "We are also prepared to provide...a team of specialists in emergency medicine to work with the North Koreans, if they are needed."

The US Agency for International Development's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, the key US

official instrumentality for delivering development assistance, would provide the technical assistance.

In January 2004, the North Koreans handed a team of Americans a chunk of plutonium and symbolically offered a deal to trade-in their weapons capabilities over time in return for development assistance and political recognition.

This time, the United States is offering the DPRK a team of Americans to provide emergency aid, symbolically prefiguring a deal to trade-in their weapons capabilities. Get it?

For once, George Bush has it right. He has not politicized the issue and has not trumpeted his move in the political marketplace.

This is the first time that the Bush Administration has offered cooperative engagement with the DPRK before the resolution of the nuclear issue. In effect, Bush is invoking the heretofore banned word "simultaneous" which refers to the DPRK's lead demand that the two adversaries move separately but concurrently, to resolve the issue in a staged manner.

Is Kim Jong Il astute enough to grasp that he has a moment in which he can test the genuine intentions of the Bush Administration towards the DPRK?

In the context of the policy struggles in Washington over engagement versus isolation of North Korea, Pyongyang should broadly - not narrowly - interpret the White House's offer to send expert medical assistance to Ryongchon before the resumption of lower-level working talks on the nuclear issue on humanitarian grounds.

For once, therefore, the ball really is in Pyongyang's court.

Kim Jong Il likely has hours and days, not weeks, to respond before events overtake this offer. Such windows of opportunity do not stay open long. Usually, they slam shut due to one or other of the inevitable random events that ambushes good intentions in US-DPRK relations.

North Korean leaders need to sift out the genuine from the politically- motivated positions of the Bush Administration. If Kim grasps this opportunity, then the working level talks will start on a completely different note of bilateral US-DPRK cooperation rather than the already anticipated sour and stale "business-as-usual" multilateral tenor that will predominate in Beijing.

Then, the people of Ryongchon would leave behind a legacy of peace, not just an epitaph that they are the latest victims of North Korea's continuing isolation and collapsing economy. Otherwise, they really will have died in vain.

Key sources: <http://usinfo.state.gov/gi/Archive/2004/Apr/27-101940.html>

For the White House April 22, 2004 announcement: U.S. Offers Aid in Wake of North Korean Rail Disaster

White House April 26 statement

The White House issued the following statement April 26 describing plans to offer assistance to North Korea following last week's rail disaster in Ryongchon:

THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Press Secretary

April 26, 2004 STATEMENT BY THE PRESS SECRETARY This weekend we heard first-hand reports about the devastation and loss of life caused by a train accident in North Korea on April 22, 2004. We are saddened by these reports. Our thoughts and prayers are with the victims of the incident and with the families that have suffered terrible loss. We have received the findings of an international assessment team, and will provide \$100,000 through the Red Cross to purchase supplies for those left homeless by the accident. We are also prepared to provide medical supplies and equipment, as well as a team of specialists in emergency medicine to work with the North Koreans, if they are needed. We provide all humanitarian aid in disasters based on need without regard to political issues. As one of the largest providers of emergency food aid to North Korea, we have consistently demonstrated our concern for the people of that country.

For the US AID public announcement:

<http://www.reliefweb.int/w/rwb.nsf/s/60508E2D06330EF585256E830072602E>

Source: US Agency for International Development

Date: 27 Apr 2004 U.S. Government responds with \$100,000 to IFRC appeal for DPRK

A massive explosion at a DPRK train station on April 22 killed over 150 people, injured 1,300 others, and damaged 1,850 homes. In response to the disaster, on April 26, the U.S. Agency for International Development's Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA) provided \$100,000 through the American Red Cross in support of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) Emergency Appeal for the victims of the train explosion in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). The USAID/OFDA contribution will support the distribution of household relief packages to 2,000 affected families. In addition, USAID/OFDA is prepared to provide medical supplies and equipment, as well as a team of emergency medicine specialists to work with the North Koreans, if they are needed.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

Produced by The Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development

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