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HEADLINE: South Korea supplies electricity to North Korea for first time

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South Korea supplied North Korea with electricity for the first time Wednesday, switching on current across the heavily armed border with its northern rival to provide power for an industrial park despite tensions over the North's nuclear program.

The electricity will power a joint North-South industrial complex in Kaesong, just north of the mine-strewn border, initially providing 15,000 kilowatts per hour and eventually supplying a total of 100,000 kilowatts per hour by 2007, the government-funded Korea Electric Power Corp. said.

The 22.8-acre (9.23-hectare) initial site will host 15 small South Korean companies by the end of this year. The first factory began producing kitchen pots in December.

South Korea has promised to expand the area into a 16,300-acre (6,520-hectare) complex where South Korean companies can have access to cheap North Korean labor.

The project provides much-needed cash for the impoverished North, and is the best-known among a handful of joint economic ventures between the two Koreas, which remain technically at war since the 1950-53 Korean War ended in a cease-fire.

But prospects for the Kaesong project are in question since North Korea's announcement last month claiming it has nuclear weapons and would boycott international disarmament talks.

Despite the standoff, South Korea has insisted that continued aid to the North is necessary for peaceful inter-Korean relations.

"Our government has been providing North Korea with rice and fertilizer on humanitarian grounds and it is desirable that this continues," South Korean Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon said Wednesday. "This is necessary not only for peace on the Korean Peninsula and the maintenance of inter-Korean relations, but also for a resolution to the nuclear crisis."

North Korea is starved for energy and blackouts are common even in the capital, Pyongyang. Nighttime satellite photos of the communist country show it swathed in darkness, a stark contrast with the bright lights of the capitalist South.

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