



U.S.: No Normal Relations With N. Korea

By GEORGE GEDDA, Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON - Citing concerns over human rights, a top State Department official said Thursday the United States will not establish normal relations with North Korea even if it fully meets U.S. demands for nuclear disarmament.

Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly made that point during a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing that focused on international efforts to convince North Korea to dismantle its nuclear weapons programs.

After four negotiating sessions with North Korea dating back to April 2003, Kelly said, "It is clear we are still far from agreement."

If North Korea takes substantial steps toward disarmament, the United States would be willing to extend trade and aid benefits to North Korea but not full normalization of relations, Kelly said. That step could be taken only after North Korea improves its human rights performance and ends objectionable activity in other areas, he said.

The disarmament talks have concentrated solely on the nuclear impasse.

Kelly said the United States and its partners in the Beijing discussions believe the nuclear issue is paramount because of the threat posed by the "ever-increasing amounts of fissionable material" being developed by the North.

In addition to the United States and North Korea, the talks involve China, South Korea Japan and Russia.

Kelly did not itemize the areas of U.S. concern about North Korea's behavior outside the nuclear arena but indicated he had no quarrel with a list of North Korean misdeeds presented at the hearing by Sen. Sam Brownback, R-Kan.

Brownback said that about 10 percent of the North Korean population has starved to death over the past 10 years as a result of the communist government's policies. In addition, he said, they "are arms merchants for virtually every evil regime in the world."

He added that North Korea engages in drug running and counterfeiting of dollars. It also maintains "slave-like" conditions for inmates at "concentration camps" that he said were comparable to those in the Hitler era.

"Can we really negotiate with a group that has this track record?" Brownback asked.

Kelly said it is less a matter of trust than verification of what might be agreed to. If and when a nuclear agreement is reached, he said, there would be further discussions with North Korea on other issues, including human rights, Pyongyang's missile program and the huge conventional force it maintains near the border with South Korea.

Committee chairman Richard Lugar, R-Ind., underscored the stakes involved in North Korea. "The North Korean regime's drive to build nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction poses a grave threat to American national security," Lugar said.

"We are concerned about the transfer of North Korean weapons, materials and technology to other countries or terrorist groups. In addition, we must remain vigilant to avoid a miscalculation that could unintentionally lead to war."

Kelly noted that at the most recent meeting of the parties in Beijing, the United States presented a detailed proposal of disarmament steps North Korea must take in exchange for economic benefits from other participants in the discussions.

For its part, North Korea is offering a nuclear freeze in exchange for energy assistance and a lifting of sanctions, including removal from the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism, Mr. Kelly said.