

Two Koreas, the US & Nuclear Madness

By Paul Vos Benkowski

As North Korean bluster continues as usual, the real story is how the rest of the world reacts to the sound and the fury. The state-controlled Bank of China has shut down transfers to North Korea's Foreign Trade Bank, an important source of the government's funding. Russia has urged North Korea to renew the diplomatic dialogue about weapons production that was abandoned in 2009. South Korea has solidified its alliance with the US and the White House has moved 9 battleships to within striking distance of North Korea. The further North Korea isolates itself the more fear seems to grow. As we have hopefully learned from previous cold wars, fear breeds more fear and irrational decisions.

Newly elected South Korean President Park Geun-Hye visited the US in early May to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the US/SK alliance, to expand future trade and to discuss labor issues in the Demilitarized Zone. Presidents Park and Obama spoke at a news conference that was dominated by the subject of North Korea. Kim Jong Un, North Korea's new dictator, has been busy ramping up the threat of nuclear strikes and testing missiles. Also in May, the last remaining South Korean worker left the Kaesong Industrial Zone, an industrial complex located 10 miles north of the DMZ, where South Korean companies can employ North Koreans as cheap but highly educated laborers.



Obama's Nuclear Turnabout

By Paul Vos Benkowski

Back in April of 2009, the newly-elected Barack Obama spoke of fulfilling one of his campaign promises, the one about cutting back the number of nuclear weapons. During the speech in Prague he stated that "clearly and with conviction America's commitment [is] to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons." That was a long time ago, and presidents aren't known for keeping promises. As of April 10, 2013, Obama appears to be very much in favor of more nuclear weapons. This is according to the proposed federal budget for 2014, in which the White House seeks to cut funding for nuclear nonproliferation programs at the Energy Department so it can spend \$537 million modernizing the US stockpile of nuclear warheads — hardly a promise kept.

The administration's nonproliferation program was aimed at lessening the security threat posed by fissile materials in other countries that could be used for nuclear weapons as well as funding for the money pit that is the Mixed-Oxide (MOX) Fuel Fabrication Plant in Savannah River, South Carolina. The Savannah River Site (SRS) was originally budgeted at \$1.8 billion but it has since ballooned to \$7.5 billion. Thankfully the 2014 budget seeks to cut the spending on SRS by 47 percent. The site is about 60 percent complete, but one senior administration official has called it "managerially and programmatically a nightmare," with continuously rising costs.

Now the administration seeks to spend \$7.87 billion on the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) Weapons Activities, a 45.5 percent increase over 2013. The NNSA budget includes funding for research, develop-

The industrial zone now sits empty and South Korea has cut electricity to the park. North Korea has also severed a cross-border hotline to Seoul.

Little is known about North Korea and its true aims in the world. One thing that is certain is the boastfulness of the Jong Dynasty. For decades North Korean leaders have been following a pattern of issuing threats and then backing off in return for aid, money and food. While in the past this pattern has worked for the impoverished nation, it now appears

that countries that have previously backed the regime are taking a cautious step away. Military observers in the US and Japan, political think tanks and pundits alike have been grasping at straws trying to figure out what goes on inside North Korea's borders. But what one intelligence agency claims to know, another disputes with a long list of rebuttals. Case in point is an April assessment by the Defense Intelligence Agency, the intelligence arm of the Pentagon, that claimed with "moderate confidence" that North Korea had learned how to make a warhead small enough to be delivered by a ballistic missile. The DIA acknowledged that any such weapon's "reliability will be low." Shortly after its publication, the validity of the assessment was challenged by President Obama himself. Obama's director of national intelligence, James Clapper, Jr., said that the assessment did not represent a consensus of the nation's intelligence community, and he added, "North Korea has not yet demonstrated the full range of capabilities necessary for a nuclear-armed missile."

Despite the murky understanding of North Korea's capabilities, the US is taking advantage of the diplomatic dustup by quietly reworking a nuclear technology exchange with South Korea. The current "Civil Nuclear Agreement" with the south, revised in 1974, expires in 2014. The new understanding will allow South Korea to enrich uranium, reprocess reactor fuel originally from the US and, eventually, manufacture its own nuclear weapons. This does not gibe with President Obama's 2009 vow to pursue a world without nuclear weapons, nor does it bode well for a tense standoff between the two Koreas — a standoff that has been on-going for 60 years. Allowing another country to make nuclear weapons will not assure anyone's safety in the region. Nor will it keep countries like Iran and North Korea from trying to build their own. Such a program can only fuel more nuclear madness which already appears too entrenched for even the President to uproot.

Depleted Uranium Updates

Uranium-238, the toxic radioactive metal used in armor-piercing shells, etc., has been blamed for cancers, birth defects and other illnesses suffered by combatants and civilians alike following warfare in Iraq and elsewhere.

BBC: Study Will Show Skyrocketing Birth Defects

Baghdad Health Ministry researchers are near completion of a report, being produced jointly with the World Health Organization, on the number of birth abnormalities since 2003. Doctors interviewed by the BBC's Yalda Hakim confirmed that their report will show rising birth defects in areas of heavy NATO bombardment since 2003. "Doctors at the Basra maternity hospital in southern Iraq have told the BBC that they have seen a 60 percent rise in birth defects since 2003. Dr. Muhsin Sabbak from the hospital is convinced that the rise in defects, such as spina bifida, is because of munitions from the Iraq war."

Israel Accused of Using DU Shells Against Syria

On May 6, *The Jerusalem Post* reported that Israeli forces used depleted uranium munitions in two May 5 attacks on a Syrian military research facility at Jamraya. *The New York Times* reported that the strikes also targeted the bases of the elite Republican Guard and storehouses of long-range missiles.

"Lost" Uranium Discovered at Scrap Metal Firm

The British daily *The Star* reported May 7 that a 28-pound "ball of uranium" that was "lost" in 2008, was found at the scrap metal smelter, Sheffield Forgemasters International, Ltd., 100 miles north of London, where it had been sent for recycling. The disclosure was only made public by the Health and Safety Executive this year, prompting Labor Party Member of Parliament Clive Betts to complain, "I would like to know what happened and why the decision was taken not to make this incident public." Graham Honeyman, CEO of Forgemasters, told *The Star*, "The inadvertent inclusion of radioactive sources in scrap metal is a recognized hazard in the steel industry. Several plants globally have been affected." In one serious disaster a recycler in Algeciras, Spain that accidentally smelted a cache of cesium-137 in 1999, dispersed a plume of cesium that doused parts of France, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic and Greece.

UK to Stop Test Firing DU at Scottish Bombing Range

The British military announced in April that its weapon-testing program will not use DU shells at its Dundern bombing range near Kirkcudbright, 100 miles south of Glasgow. The British military had been expected to restart test-firing its uranium tank munitions this year but the plan was hotly contested by anti-DU activists and local MPs, Rachel Thompson of the Campaign Against Depleted Uranium said, "The U-turn is linked to increased parliamentary and public opposition to this environmentally dubious and potentially illegal practice. This is a major victory for our campaign and one that reflects the increasing global opposition to DU weapons." —*JL*

The UK's Irresponsible Nuclear Industry

As if we needed more proof of the dangers of nuclear power, England has started to rival the US in the number of radiation accidents. This partial list culled from more than 30 mishaps in the last 10 years was released by the UK's Health and Safety Executive (HSE), a federal agency akin to the US Occupational Health and Safety Administration.

- In 2001, the Royal Free Hospital in London lost a pack of cesium-137 that had been used inside a patient's body to burn away malignant gynecological cancer cells. The cesium was erroneously thought to have been returned to locked storage. Instead, it took the hospital three months to realize it was missing. The hospital pleaded guilty to seven separate offences related to the accident and was fined a total of \$136,000.

- The marine power operations of the Rolls-Royce motor company has been under investigation due to an incident at the firm's Derby location. The accident took place in 2011 when small pellets of extremely radioactive yttrium-169 went missing. Asked for confirmation of the reported loss, the HSE said in a statement that the material contained "high radioactivity" and is used for "irradiation and industrial radiography." The HSE said, "These can present a very significant risk of injury or death to persons exposed even for a relatively short time."

- In February this year the decommissioned Sellafield reactor near Seascale in northern Cumbria was fined by the Environment Agency and the Office for Nuclear Regulation for shipping four bags of waste to the wrong facility. All trash leaving the contaminated site must be sent to the Low Level Waste Repository in nearby Drigg. Instead it was sent to a common landfill. Ian Parker, a regulation manager for the Environment Agency, said, "This work of

decommissioning and clean-up of the site is a national priority and we will continue to work with Sellafield, Ltd., fellow regulators and the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority to ensure that ... Sellafield Ltd maintains high standards of environmental performance to protect people and the environment." Sellafield will face charges and a fine for its negligence.

- Earlier this year a small canister of iridium-192 was stolen from a van in Lancashire. Local police said the yellow canister, which is marked with the radiation warning, was taken from a Peugeot van which was parked in a residential neighborhood. Officers were alerted to the incident in the early morning after the van's driver discovered the material was missing. The canister was found at a nearby park a month later.

- Back in 2008, during the renovation of the Northampton School for Girls, a storage locker was stolen as part of a larger theft. Inside the locker were containers of strontium-90, plutonium-239, radium-226, cobalt-60. The incident was reported to police and the correct procedures were followed with both the HSE and the Environment Agency being notified, but the materials were never recovered.

- A truck carrying radioactive waste collided with a car on a bridge near the central Scottish city of Perth. No one was injured in the accident and the sealed canisters holding the radioactive waste were undamaged. As a precaution, the police set up a temporary exclusion zone around the bridge and residents near the crash site were warned to stay inside and close their windows and doors while the site was inspected. — *The Guardian*, May 5; *Derby Telegraph*, May 7; *Northampton Chronicle*, May 9; *Daily Mail*, Feb. 18, 2013

— *PVB*