

# Is North Korea next on U.S. hit list?

by Lydia Cherry

North Korea may be as close as “a few months” away from building an actual nuclear weapon, U.S. Director of Central Intelligence Robert Gates told the House Foreign Affairs Committee Feb. 26. “We have some information that suggests that they have a deception plan for hiding their nuclear capabilities,” he continued, adding that the country is one of the world’s “major proliferation threats.” Widening the discussion to a possible Iranian threat, Gates added that North Korea is “Teheran’s principal source of special weapons.” Syria, “too, has turned to North Korea”; Libya, he said, is trying to expand its special weapons capabilities, but only with mixed success. “Tripoli is shopping diligently for an alternative. . . . North Korea may be the answer.”

The CIA chief’s testimony was part of a drumbeat emanating for several weeks from the United States against North Korea, in a period in which it has become clear that George Bush might take any number of military actions against small countries for purely electoral reasons. The notion that Third World nations have no right to technologies that may or may not be used for weapons development has become the cutting edge of Bush’s “new world order.”

## The threat to use force

On Feb. 18, a week before Gates’s testimony, U.S. Rep. Les Aspin (D-Wisc.), chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, called for “a stated U.S. policy” of using military strikes “if there is no other way to stop a small country from developing nuclear weapons.” Speaking at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, Aspin said the United States should first try to get international support for such a hit, “but it’s not critical. If you can’t get it, it doesn’t mean you shouldn’t do it.”

With the fading of the threat posed by former Soviet forces, the United States “is the biggest conventional force on the block,” he said. “Proliferators may threaten nuclear use to deter the United States and the international community from taking actions that are in our interests.” Knocking out this potential should be the United States’ “major focus,” Aspin insisted. Iraq was within a year of acquiring a nuclear capability, he claimed. “North Korea is now within a similarly short distance.”

During the last week in February, the United States gave North Korea a deadline of the end of June to open its nuclear

facilities to international inspection; the “or else” has not been made public.

Douglas Paal, senior official at the National Security Council, in a meeting with South Korean leaders in Seoul on Feb. 24, expressed U.S. displeasure with the lack of progress in North and South Korean discussion over control of nuclear facilities.

The *Washington Times*, in a front-page story written from Tokyo on Feb. 25, quoted Japanese officials who met with Paal in Tokyo before he left for Seoul. “It sounded like the Gulf war all over again,” a Japanese Foreign Ministry official is quoted saying. “If the United States has drawn a line in the sand as an ultimatum to Kim Il-Sung like the one to Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Japan could be drawn into a conflict against its will.” Tetsuo Mitsuda, a television commentator, said the ultimatum is tied to the U.S. elections. “It is an election year in the United States and anything could happen,” he said. “Remember Grenada and Panama.”

## North Korea responds

What do they expect we will do—blow up our neighbors? North Korea’s paramount leader, Kim Il-Sung asked in discussions with South Korea’s Prime Minister Chung Won-shik on Feb. 19. “It is unimaginable for us to develop nuclear weapons which could slaughter our fellow countrymen; nobody can deny this! We do not intend at all to have a nuclear confrontation with the powerful countries surrounding us.” With the collapse of East bloc communism, North Korea has been groping for economic and political alliances with countries such as Japan, Taiwan, Indonesia, Malaysia, and of course with South Korea (while maintaining strong diplomatic links with the People’s Republic of China, Cuba, and Iran).

South Korean officials are critical of the strong pressure the United States is exerting on North Korea, according to some South Korean press reports. The South Korean daily paper *Hangyore Sinmun* on Feb. 11 quoted an official noting that Bush administration pressure tactics—which include economic sanctions using the United Nations—are not backed by his government. “At a time when North Korea has signed the nuclear safeguards accord with the IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency], when the North and South have agreed to conduct mutual nuclear inspections in the wake of their declaration of the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, and thus, when North-South dialogue is entering a mature stage, it is undesirable to impose strong pressure on North Korea,” the paper quoted the unidentified South Korean official.

On Feb. 18, the prime ministers of the two Koreas formalized a nuclear weapons ban treaty. North Korea, however, has announced that the ratification of the IAEA safeguards accord must await a full session of its Supreme People’s Assembly, which means that ratification might be delayed until early April.