

NHK Interview November 14, 2008

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Question 1. Why is North Korea abruptly shutting down its Red Cross Office, disconnecting the hot line between the two Koreas and saying it will bar all crossings between the two Koreas through the DMZ from the beginning of December.

Answer: I think two factors are at work here.

First, Pyongyang is very frustrated that South Korean President Lee Myung-bak, in office since February, because he has resumed a hard line approach toward Pyongyang and is also cooperating closely with Washington and Tokyo and the nuclear issue. Pyongyang first expressed its frustration by calling President Lee names and now is backing its displeasure with deeds.

Secondly, Pyongyang may hope that shutting down the South-North reconciliation process might convince the new Obama Administration to pressure Seoul to be more conciliatory toward Pyongyang. Recently members of Obama's transition team met with North Korean officials in New York. The Obama camp's eagerness to establish a more conciliatory posture toward Pyongyang may have raised Pyongyang's expectation that President Obama will pursue a relatively conciliatory policy toward North Korea. If so, Pyongyang could hope that Obama will pressure Seoul to adopt Washington's approach.

Question 2. Why are North Korea and the United States at odds over the issue of sampling?

Sampling is a critical issue for both sides. North Korea has rejected the taking of any samples at its nuclear facility since 1993. The IAEA took the first samples during an inspection in 1993, analyzed them and decided that North Korea had lied about how much plutonium it had previously produced. Ever since North Korea has claimed that "sampling" would infringe upon its sovereignty and that it cannot trust anyone to conduct accurate and unbiased analysis of such samples.

The United States, however, has always maintained, together with the international community, that the taking of samples at nuclear facilities is the only way to conduct a rigorous verification process. Without samples, verification is meaningless.

All of this strongly suggests that there might not be any progress toward resolution of the nuclear issue for some time. Also resumption of the Six Party Talks could be delayed until at least after Obama becomes president in late January 2009.