

VOA Note #19

DATE: August 1993

EVENT: US-North Korea Nuclear Talks Stale - Visas for IAEA Inspectors

PLACE: Department of State, Washington, DC

PRESENT: DPRK Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN
Ho Jong, US Ambassador to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and North Korea Affairs Officer C. Kenneth Quinones

The US-North Korea nuclear talks in Geneva had ended on an inconclusive note. Each side had issued separate statements that summarized their respective views. The United States had insisted that, before it would again meet to discuss the nuclear issue, North Korea resume dialogue with South Korea and allow IAEA inspectors to visit its Yongbyon nuclear facility to ensure that “full scope nuclear safeguards” were being maintained. This had been a key element in the June 11, 1993 Joint Statement.

Pyongyang had promised to readmit, on a temporary basis, IAEA inspectors to Yongbyon but rejected US demands that it resume talks with South Korea. Pyongyang said it could not be held responsible for this second condition since Seoul could always block the resumption of dialogue with excessive preconditions.

At the end of July, 1993, on Saturday July 31, I was at the State Department as usual. The Office of Korea Affairs is a busy place on Saturday because that was the best day of the week to catch up on work without being interrupted by writing press guidance and visitors. Also, August is usually a quiet time in Washington, DC because government officials in foreign capitals, like the US capital, usually take their summer vacations during this hot and humid time of year.

After reviewing the current situation with Deputy Assistant Secretary of East Asia and Pacific Affairs, he departed for a two week vacation. Assistant Secretary for Politico-Military Affairs Robert Gallucci and his deputy were already on leave. All three were key members of the US negotiating team at the nuclear talks. Also at the time, the new director and deputy of director of the Korea Affairs Office had yet to arrive. Of the two South Korea Affairs officers, one was on sick leave for mental illness and the other was mourning the death of his young daughter. This left me alone with only the two Korea Desk economic officers.

While reading through a pile of confidential reports, my office telephone rang. It was Ambassador Ho Jong. He was calling me in my capacity as the “New York Channel.” He said his government had ordered him to inform the Department of State that IAEA inspectors would be permitted to visit Yongbyon but there was a bureaucratic problem. IAEA headquarter staff in Vienna and DPRK diplomatic mission personnel were squabbling over the issuance of visas. I promised to check with the US Ambassador to the IAEA, the same lady who had driven me to the DPRK mission in Geneva early one morning during round two of the nuclear talks.

With the assistance of the State Department’s Operation Center, I was soon in touch with the ambassador. Although it was very late at night in Vienna, she promised to

contact the IAEA authorities and would then call me at my home Sunday morning. After telling Ho Jong of the plan, I headed for my home in Reston, Virginia.

Sunday Ho Jong called me first. He said that his government was willing to host the IAEA inspectors but first a cable had to be sent from the Foreign Ministry in Pyongyang to Vienna authorizing the issuance of the visas for the inspectors. Dispatch of the cable to Vienna, however, had been delayed because it was the weekend and no one was at work in the ministry's international affairs division. Shortly afterward I learned from our ambassador in Vienna that North Korea's mission in Vienna had rejected IAEA requests for issuance of the visas. Ho Jong insisted the problem was "administrative" and not a matter of policy. He repeatedly asserted that Pyongyang was intent upon fulfilling its promise to host an IAEA inspection.

Obviously there was a bureaucratic disconnect. The North Korean bureaucracy was proving to be as inefficient as any other bureaucracy in the world. While Washington was shutting down for summer vacation, Pyongyang was shut down for the weekend. Further compounding the situation were US government rules that only I could talk to North Korean officials. Our US diplomatic personnel in Vienna, including the ambassador, could not talk directly to their counterparts at the DPRK embassy in Vienna. Thus I became the middle man in this triangle centered in Vienna, Austria. IAEA officials would talk to their DPRK counterparts in Vienna who then relayed this information to Pyongyang which passed it to Ho Jong in New York and he then called me. At the same time, the IAEA was sharing similar information with our ambassador in Vienna who called me so that I could talk to Ho Jong. This telephone tag continued all day and night on Sunday and Monday.

A totally unexpected problem erupted just when we thought a resolution had been achieved. Pyongyang finally had sent a cable to its Vienna mission authoring issuance of the visas. The DPRK mission informed the IAEA headquarters that the IAEA should send a driver to the DPRK mission to pick up the authorization letter so that it could be faxed to the IAEA inspectors waiting in Beijing. But then the IAEA staff refused to drive to the DPRK mission because it was late at night and the mission was located in an unsafe area of Vienna.

To make a very long story short, Ho Jong promptly side stepped this problem when he informed me that the DPRK mission in Beijing had been authorized to issue visas to IAEA inspectors on Monday so that they could then fly to Pyongyang on Tuesday. Then, like now, there are only two flights per week from Beijing to Pyongyang – Tuesday and Saturday. Fortunately the IAEA inspectors were already in Beijing awaiting authorization to apply for their visas to North Korea. Abruptly and without explanation, the IAEA headquarters ordered their inspectors in Beijing to return promptly to Vienna, but fortunately for all involved, the inspectors were unable to leave immediately. They lacked airline reservations. Then North Korean visas were delivered to them on Tuesday August 3 and they flew to Pyongyang.

The IAEA inspectors were able to conduct a restricted inspection at Yongbyon between August 4 and 9. Their activities were limited to checking the monitoring cameras, reviewing film and replacing film that recorded all activities that took place within the most sensitive facilities at the Yongbyon nuclear research center. This was

sufficient to confirm that North Korea was maintaining “full scope nuclear safe guards.” Later on August 18 the IAEA confirmed that the North Korean authorities had invited its representatives to Pyongyang for talks about how to maintain nuclear safe guards, i.e. IAEA inspections.

Nevertheless, some in Washington accused North Korea of acting in bad faith and making it unnecessarily difficult for IAEA inspectors to visit North Korea. These allegations angered some in Pyongyang. What had begun as a bureaucratic “snafu” soon escalated into a widening misunderstanding and exchange of accusations between the two governments.

I think the entire episode was a consequence of bureaucratic fumbling by staff at the IAEA headquarters in Vienna and at North Korea’s mission in Geneva and International Affairs Division at the Foreign Ministry in Pyongyang. As Ho Jong had claimed, I agree that this was an “administrative” and not a policy problem. Nevertheless, the episode had multiple policy implications.

Critics in Seoul and Washington of the US-DPRK nuclear talks pointed to Pyongyang’s tardy issuance of the visas to IAEA inspectors as further evidence that North Korea could not be trusted. The government in Seoul was particularly frustrated that Washington had not been able to compel Pyongyang to resume South-North Korea dialogue. Pyongyang’s critics of the talks countered with their own allegations. The visa episode, combined with Pyongyang’s refusal to meet with Seoul, damaged the fragile mutual trust that had been built during the first two rounds of the nuclear talks. It would take many months and numerous “New York Channel” meetings to restore an atmosphere of mutual trust conducive to the resumption of the US-DPRK nuclear talks.

C. Kenneth Quinones
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