

North Korea 'determined to carry out underground test'

By Sergey Soukhorukov in Pyongyang

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Russian diplomats believe it is now "highly probable" that North Korea will officially join the nuclear club by carrying out its first underground test of an atomic device.

Kim Jong II, the North Korean leader, is said to have made clear his intention to explode a device during recent talks with Russian and Chinese officials in Pyongyang.

Although he was pressed to resume six-party talks over his nuclear programme, the Russians concluded that he was serious in his desire to demonstrate that his scientists have successfully built a nuclear weapon.

advertisement Their fears appear to bolster American suspicions that a test is being prepared, after intelligence reports last month of unusual vehicle movements in the area believed to be the test site. Any such test would be an escalation of tension in the region and would raise the stakes in the stand-off with the United States.

During talks at the Russian and Chinese embassies, Kim was warned that such a move would alienate even Moscow and Beijing – regarded as North Korea's closest friends – who were infuriated by the country's long-range missile tests earlier this summer.

"If North Korea conducts an underground nuclear test, it will face severe punishment," said one Russian diplomat.

"It would pose a very serious threat to world peace."

He said Kim Jong II was "irritated" by financial sanctions imposed last year by the US, including the blocking of bank accounts abroad believed to have been used for money laundering and other illegal deals, including arms and drugs trading.

Kim is said to have threatened "to use all necessary means" – including further development of the nuclear deterrent – to make Washington change its position. Six-party talks with China, America, South Korea, Japan and Russia, aimed at persuading Kim to abandon his nuclear ambitions were suspended last November.

In Washington, the State Department's spokesman, Sean McCormack, said last week that a North Korean nuclear test would be "a deeply provocative act".

Kim disappeared from the public eye the day before large scale missile tests on July 5, prompting speculation that he had gone into hiding in case there was a military response to the tests.

A book by the North Korean leader's former sushi chef, Kenji Fujimoto, says that Kim has had a bunker built near Pyongyang to shelter from a nuclear attack.

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