

U.S. Sec. Rice Agreed with Min. Ban:

SPTs Are the Best Way To Solve Nuclear Standoff

The U.S. Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, who had once labeled the North as an 'outpost of tyranny,' described North Korea as a 'sovereign state.' "We could say, it is a fact that North Korea is a sovereign state. It is in the United Nations. We are in negotiations with it in the Six-Party Talks (SPTs)," said the U.S. Secretary of State at a joint press conference after talks with Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Ban Ki-moon in Seoul.

"We also agreed that the SPTs are the best way for North Korea to receive the respect it requires and the assistance it needs," Rice said referring to the results of the meeting with her counterpart Ban.

It was the first time that Rice has called North Korea a sovereign state, which a government source here said, "It is a move made after extensive contemplation. It could be interpreted into Washington's open and official recognition of North Korea's international position and as a negotiating partner."

Minister Ban hoped that her comments would create an environment which would be encouraging enough for talks to resume.

Rice and Ban said unequivocally that Washington and Seoul have agreed that the SPTs are the best way to solve the nuclear standoff and that they will continue to coordinate their positions "very closely." "If North Korea is prepared to make a strategic choice, we have said within the context of the SPTs, there will be security assurance for North Korea."

Rice agreed with Ban, who said that there will be "direct dialogue within the six-party frames" between Washington and Pyongyang. She urged the North to return to the SPTs, which both Seoul and Washington believe to be the best solution. "It cannot go on forever," she said, referring to North Korea's nuclear standoff. "The SPT is the table where they (North Korea) can get the assistance that they need."

"South Korea and the U.S. are ready to seriously discuss all issues of concern, including those of North Korea at the SPT," he told reporters. "Within the context of the SPTs, diverse formats of discussions, including direct dialogue between the U.S. and North Korea, will be possible."

Asked her comment on the Japanese bid to enter the U.N. Security Council membership at the roundtable discussion with local reporters, the U.S. Secretary of State said that the United Nations' most powerful body should include Japan, one of the global governing body's largest benefactors and a major economic power.

"We have supported Japan's request for a permanent seat on the Security Council for some time now. In August 2004, Secretary [Colin] Powell first talked about our support for the Japan's Security Council membership," said Rice. She added, "The Japanese is the second largest contributor to the United Nations, just right after the United States. That needs to be recognized."

Stressing that Japan is also playing a more global role in terms of helping peace and democracy efforts in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan, Rice said, "Washington's alliance with Seoul and Tokyo is what promotes peace and stability not just on the Korean Peninsula, but the entire region."

"It is obviously our view that when Japan, the United States and South Korea are working together, we have demonstrated how much good we can do in a region like this. It is under that cooperative and alliance relationship that the United States has had with each of the countries that democratic development has taken place both in Japan and in South Korea.

"The economic prosperity has grown dramatically so that this region is leading in many ways the economic prosperity of the world, where we are able to deal with security problems like the North Korean nuclear problem together and where the United States count on its South Korean ally as a global friend and its Japan ally as a global friend."

During her stay in Seoul, U.S. Secretary of State Rice paid a courtesy call on President Roh Moo-hyun and discussed the future of the SPTs and the nuclear standoff. Roh explained to Rice in detail about the current flareup with Japan over the sovereignty of the Dokdo Island and other history issues. The President wished to highlight how these matters must be overcome for sake of Korea-Japan relations and the settlement of the peace in Northeast Asia, according to the presidential spokesman, Kim Man-soo.

Roh's comments to Rice marked the first time the president has spoken outside government circles on the Dokdo controversy since it erupted last week, when Japan's Shimane Prefecture passed a bill symbolically claiming sovereignty of the Dokdo Islands and prompting vehement and emotional protests from angry Koreans.

Arriving in Seoul on March, Rice spent time on some "extra-curricular" activities, such as a meeting with university students and a visit to a U.S. military unit. Rice, as well-known by

the nickname "steel magnolia" as her pet name "Condi Rice," tried a little tenderness with South Korean youngsters.

It has been about eight months since she made her last visit to Seoul - at the time as the national security advisor under President George W. Bush's first-term U.S. administration. But there was something other than her official position that made slight, but tangible differences between this time and her visit last July.

Before starting her "official" work - meeting President Roh Moo-hyun and other security and foreign affairs ministers - on March 20, she also had a roundtable discussion with a group of young journalists from Internet-based news outlets.