

BLITZER: Welcome back to 'LATE EDITION.'

North Korea's surprise announcement that it does indeed have nuclear weapons is presenting a serious hurdle for the Bush administration. But the stakes are even higher for North Korea's neighbor, South Korea.

Joining us now to assess North Korea's nuclear ambitions, what the world response should be, is the foreign minister of South Korea, Ki-Moon Ban.

Mr. Foreign Minister, welcome to 'LATE EDITION.' Welcome to Washington.

KI-MOON BAN, SOUTH KOREA'S FOREIGN MINISTER: Thank you. It is a great pleasure for me.

BLITZER: The North Koreans made this declaration this week. I'll put the words up on the screen:

"The U.S. disclosed its attempt to topple the political system in the DPRK" -- that's North Korea -- "at any cost, threatening us with a nuclear stick. This compels us to take a measure to bolster our nuclear weapons arsenal in order to protect the ideology, system, freedom and democracy chosen by our people."

First of all, do you believe North Korea, the North Korean government? Do they have a nuclear bomb or more?

BAN: Well, the intelligence community believes that North Korea seems to -- might have made one or two nuclear weapons out of plutoniums, about 10 to 14 nuclear materials that they have reprocessed during the last seven years...

BLITZER: They've never tested a nuclear weapon.

(CROSSTALK)

BAN: ... but the intelligence communities and government concern, they're closely assessing this information.

BLITZER: What does South Korea believe, your government?

BAN: We think that, still, we need to assess this situation very closely, whether they have, in fact, made nuclear weapons.

But at the same time, we take note seriously that North Koreans has made official statements through their spokesperson of the foreign ministry.

BLITZER: Because you know the defense secretary of the United States, Donald Rumsfeld, this week said, you know what, we don't know, the United States doesn't know if they have a nuclear weapon. It's possible they may just be saying it. They could be bluffing for their own political purposes.

BAN: I think they may have tried to use the situation to raise the stakes to strengthen positions in the negotiating tables.

But as Secretary Rumsfeld said, that we have to yet to analyze carefully the situations and intelligence and also the statement North Korea has made this week.

BLITZER: If North Korea does, in fact, have nuclear weapons, will South Korea follow suit?

BAN: I don't think so. Korean government has declared and signed the joint declaration to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula in 1992, together with North Korea. North Korea must abandon this nuclear weapons development program, and Korean government adheres to this principle.

BLITZER: What if they don't, though? What if they go ahead -- what if they were to test a nuclear bomb? Would you reconsider your position?

BAN: That is exactly why we are now trying to resolve this issue peacefully, diplomatically, within the framework of six-party talks. And we will continue to do so. And we will continue to urge in close cooperation with the countries concerned to North Korea to abandon nuclear weapons development program.

BLITZER: The North Korean government insists on bilateral talks with the United States. They don't want the six-party talks, including Russia and Japan and South Korea and China. They want only talks with the United States.

Should the Bush administration -- and you'll be meeting with Condoleezza Rice, the secretary of state, tomorrow -- should the Bush administration engage in bilateral negotiations with the government of Pyongyang?

BAN: We believe that nuclear issues is not a bilateral issue between the United States and North Korea. It is, rather, a regional and global issue. Therefore, it is a consensus of the international community that this kind of issue of weapons of mass destruction, like the nuclear issue, should be resolved in close cooperation of international community.

This time, six countries are cooperating closely to resolve this issue within the six-party framework.

BLITZER: So the answer is, the United States should not have separate bilateral negotiations with North Korea?

BAN: In fact, during the three rounds of six-party talks in the past, North Korea and the United States have had some direct talks within the framework of six-party talks.

Once the six-party talk is held, I think the United States and North Korea can have more direct talks.

BLITZER: Within the framework of the...

BAN: Within the framework of the six-party talks.

BLITZER: There was a story in the Financial Times that quoted a South Korean defense ministry paper on February 5th that said this: "In case of an emergency on the Korean Peninsula, the United States has a plan to send more than 40 percent of its entire navy, more than half of its air force, and more than 70 percent of its Marine Corps to defend South Korea."

Is that true?

BAN: Yes.

BLITZER: That's the U.S. plan, based on the information the U.S. government has given you?

BAN: We have been maintaining combined defense posture, together with -- between the United States and the Republic of Korea. We have been assured by or (ph) even strengthened defense capabilities by the United States. And we are maintaining very close alliance with the United States.

BLITZER: So you're not concerned that the U.S. military may be overstretched right now because of the fighting in Iraq?

BAN: We think that the United States has enough capabilities to deal with all these regional conflicts while they are concentrating their military forces in Iraq. I think the United States and Koreans in close combined defense capabilities can maintain and can deal with any threats.

BLITZER: Let's talk about the leader of North Korea, Kim Jong Il. A lot of speculation, he's erratic, he's crazy. Others say he's very sophisticated, very shrewd, very savvy.

No one understands him as well as other Koreans. Give us your assessment. Who is this man? Is he capable, for example, if he had a nuclear bomb, of using it?

BAN: Well, I'm not in a position to predict what he will do with this nuclear weapons program. We know that he has been controlling the North Korean society fairly well and maintaining social and political regimes in North Korea.

In fact, there was a summit meeting between the two presidents, two leaders of South and North Korea in 2000, and we hope that North Korean leader will adhere to joint statement of June 15, 2000, issued between the two leaders.

BLITZER: But the bottom line, is he stable or is he erratic?

BAN: I think that he is stable at this time, as far as we have our informations and intelligence.

BLITZER: The foreign minister of South Korea, right at the heart of this enormous problem for not only your region but the entire world.

We appreciate your joining us very much. Thanks very much. Welcome to Washington once again. Good luck.

BAN: Well, thank you very much.

BLITZER: Ki-Moon Ban, the foreign minister of South Korea.

And still ahead, insight from the two top members of the United States Senate Intelligence Committee on the implications of the Iraqi election results, the tough talk from North Korea and more.

But up next we'll have a quick check of what's in the news right now, including Pope John Paul II, back out in public at the Vatican after his hospitalization.