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North Korean Refugees Enter Japanese School in Beijing

October 28, 2009 01:23 AM

Seven people believed to be North Koreans have entered a Japanese school in Beijing seeking refuge. The incident comes as Japanese relations with both North Korea and China are worsening.

Japanese Embassy spokesman Keiji Ide says security cameras at the school alerted embassy personnel to the break-in just before 4:00 a.m. Friday local time. "It seems to us they are from North Korea," he stated. "We decided to bring them to the embassy building. Six of them are adults and one is a small child, two men and four women."

Mr. Ide says there are now 16 North Koreans taking refuge in the Japanese compound.

In the past two years, scores of North Koreans have rushed diplomatic compounds in Beijing and other Chinese cities, hoping for asylum and transit to another country - usually South Korea. There are reportedly tens of thousands more North Koreans hiding throughout China, fleeing hunger and political repression in their communist homeland.

Beijing, North Korea's closest ally, refuses to grant the Koreans refugee status, and has objected to international support for those within its borders.

Friday's asylum bid may strain Japan's already frayed relations with both China and North Korea.

Tokyo is engaged in a heated dispute with Pyongyang over North Korea's program of kidnapping Japanese during the Cold War. The North Koreans say eight of the 13 Japanese they admit to abducting have since died. Pyongyang has handed over human remains it said belonged to two of the abductees, but last week Tokyo said forensic analysis had revealed that the remains belonged to other people.

The Japanese government is now under mounting public pressure to impose economic sanctions on Pyongyang. Pyongyang has replied by saying this would amount to a declaration of war.

And at the same time, Tokyo's relations with Beijing have been tested by a series of disputes over maritime borders, and the issuance of a visitor's visa to a former Taiwanese president.

Shiela Smith, a political analyst with the East-West Center in Hawaii, says the diplomatic tensions reflect Japanese unease with China's growing regional influence. "The Japanese are beginning to think through the rise of Chinese power, the implicit contention between Japan and China over the leadership role in the Asia-Pacific," she said.

Last week Japan said it would start to treat China, along with North Korea, as a potential national security threat, and began reorienting its military defenses accordingly.

These disputes come as Japan and China, together with the United States, Russia and South Korea, are pressing North Korea to rejoin talks aimed at ending the North's nuclear weapons program.

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Japan says North Korea has rejected scientific findings concerning human remains Pyongyang recently handed over. This response comes as the Japanese foreign minister says that economic sanctions could be imposed against North Korea if the issue of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea is not resolved. The Japanese Foreign Ministry says North Korea accuses Tokyo of making up scientific evidence that the remains were not those of two Japanese citizens Pyongyang has...

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Pyongyang Says Japanese Sanctions Would Amount to 'War'

North Korea has warned Japan that any sanctions against the communist state would be regarded as a declaration of war. Opinion polls show about two-thirds of the Japanese public supporting economic sanctions over the issue of Japanese kidnapped by North Korea during the Cold War. North Korea's Central News Agency quoted an official as saying the country will hit Japan with an "effective physical

response" if Tokyo imposes sanctions. The official on Wednesday also...

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Japan's foreign minister has warned North Korea that time is running out to stop its nuclear weapons program before Tokyo and its allies impose economic sanctions. In an interview on Japan's NHK television Sunday, Nobutaka Machimura said that if the situation continues for a year or two, the issue will have to be sent to the UN Security Council. Mr. Machimura said Tokyo could also start economic sanctions if Pyongyang does not tell the truth about eight of 13...

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Japanese, South Korean Leaders Hold Talks

The leaders of Japan and South Korea say they will continue working together to revive stalled talks on North Korea's nuclear weapons programs. Japan and South Korea on Friday called for North Korea to quickly return to stalled six-way talks aimed at ending its nuclear weapons programs. The call came in a joint declaration after talks between Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun at a resort in Japan's Kagoshima...