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South Korean President: Conditions Ripe for Resuming North Korean Nuclear Talks

By Kurt Achin

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South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun says he thinks conditions have improved for a new round of multilateral talks on dismantling North Korea's nuclear programs. Kurt Achin reports from Seoul, where Mr. Roh gave his first national address of 2005.

South Korean President Roh Moo-Hyun expressed renewed hope Thursday that six-nation talks would eventually solve the problem of North Korea's nuclear weapons programs.

In an annual New Year's address and news conference at the presidential Blue House here in Seoul, Mr. Roh says conditions are "ripe" for stalled talks to resume.

Mr. Roh said he cannot set a definitive date for the talks, but expects they can resume soon after President Bush is inaugurated for a second term this month.

North Korea boycotted the fourth round of talks in September, after Beijing hosted three unsuccessful rounds involving Japan, Russia, and the United States. Pyongyang said it wants a second Bush administration to change what it calls a "hostile US attitude" and massive aid.

Washington demands that North Korea irreversibly and verifiably dismantle its nuclear weapons programs - as promised under numerous international agreements.

President Roh also outlined prospects for tense North-South relations - saying he is open to a summit but does not think leader Kim Jong Il will accept anytime soon.

The two countries have been divided for more than 50 years and have never signed a peace treaty since the Korean War ended in 1953.

Separately, Mr. Roh said South Korean forces would continue to participate in stabilization operations in Iraq past this month's scheduled elections.

Mr. Roh said South Korea would remain in Northern Iraq until the country is more stable, but added he doesn't believe Seoul's deployment will last much longer.

President Roh also outlined plans to hold a meeting with the chiefs of South Korea's large conglomerates, as a step toward revitalizing the country's economy. He promises to follow through on pledges to make government more transparent, and expand job creation by strengthening small and medium-sized businesses.

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U.S. lawmakers returning from the North Korean capital are optimistic about the resumption of talks to deal with the North's nuclear weapons programs. Republican Representative Curt Weldon told reporters in Seoul Friday he believes six-party talks about the North Korean nuclear issue can resume in weeks rather than months. Mr. Weldon led five other U.S. lawmakers in a visit to Pyongyang, where they spent the past four days, and met with North Korea's second highest...

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