South Korea's foreign minister has sounded a note of urgency about stalled talks on North Korea's nuclear disarmament. While speculation percolates that North Korea may conduct a nuclear test, Seoul says it is preparing for "all possibilities."

"North Korea should realize the current situation in which the six-party talks are not taking place cannot go on aimlessly, and should stop hanging on to unreasonable allegations," he said. "I can tell you that our government is reviewing measures with all possibilities in mind."

Mr. Ban did not elaborate on what specific possibilities the South Korean government is discussing. News media have recently reported on U.S. intelligence concerns that the North may be preparing to test a nuclear device, but South Korea says it has seen no signs a test is imminent.

Information about North Korea's nuclear activities is extremely limited, and analysts warn the North may choose to choreograph movements on the ground for U.S. spy satellites to alarm Washington and its allies.

Nearly a year has passed since the last round of disarmament talks involving North Korea, the United States, South Korea, Japan, Russia, and China. Since
then, Pyongyang has declared it has nuclear weapons and is making more, despite several past agreements to remain nuclear free.

On Sunday, a North Korean spokesman called President Bush a "hooligan" and ruled out any return to the six-party talks during his term. The same day, Pyongyang test fired a short-range missile off its eastern shore - a move South Korean officials, however, say should not be connected to the nuclear issue.

The United States has repeatedly responded to North Korean complaints that it has a "hostile attitude" by saying it has no intention of attacking North Korea. Washington says that giving up its nuclear ambitions could lead to the security guarantees and economic assistance Pyongyang wants.

Many South Korean experts, including government officials, say privately they doubt North Korea will test a nuclear weapon, because it would galvanize world sentiment against Pyongyang. The isolated Stalinist government is trying hard to feed its people but to continue receiving aid it needs acceptance from the international community.

They say North Korea probably wants to hold on to its nuclear weapons, because it is the only card it has left for international leverage.

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