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# North Korea Announces Further Steps to Build Nuclear Weapons

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North Korea says it has removed all remaining spent nuclear fuel rods from its main reactor, a measure that would enable it to extract more plutonium to build bombs. Some analysts say the announcement is yet another provocative measure as Pyongyang continues to shun negotiations with the United States and others over ending its nuclear weapons programs.

A North Korean television news announcer quotes a government statement saying that technicians have removed 8000 spent fuel rods from the Yongbyon nuclear plant.

Tim Savage, a security analyst with the International Crisis Group research organization in Seoul, says announcing the removal of the materials from the reactor seems for now to be a provocative move by North Korea. He says it does not signal an immediate threat.

"It's going to take them a couple of months to reprocess it. So, it's adding fuel to the fire but it's not anything spectacularly new," said Mr. Savage.

South Korea's government said Wednesday it is concerned by the report, and it urges North Korea to return to six-nation talks on ending its nuclear programs.

Wednesday's announcement follows recent reports from Washington that satellite images indicate North Korea has taken some steps to prepare for a test explosion. In addition, a few weeks ago South Korean and U.S. officials said it appeared Pyongyang had shut down Yongbyon, possibly to remove the fuel rods.

North Korea says it possesses nuclear weapons and many experts believe it at least has enough plutonium to build several bombs. The United States and other nations are pushing Pyongyang to give up the weapons and comply with its past international commitments to remain nuclear free.

The new U.S. ambassador to Japan on Wednesday said a test would be a serious blow to the process of bringing the North back to multi-party negotiations on ending its nuclear program. Ambassador Thomas Schieffer told a group of Japanese politicians he believes Pyongyang has taken steps to test a bomb.

Pyongyang has refused to rejoin talks hosted by China that include: Japan, South Korea, Russia, and the United States. The talks stalled when North Korea refused to attend a fourth round in September, accusing the United States of taking a hostile attitude toward the North.

U.S. officials say the six-party talks are the best opportunity North Korea has to settle the crisis peacefully and receive the aid and security guarantees it wants. When asked this week about Pyongyang's possible plans for a test, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said anything the North Koreans do to escalate the situation is only going to isolate them further.