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Pyongyang agrees in principle to new 6-way talks

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SEOUL -- North Korea has agreed in principle to a new round of six-party negotiations and could reap a "very rich basket" of economic incentives for dismantling its nuclear program, a U.S. official said yesterday.

North Korea told American negotiators last week that it wants to resume the long-running talks on its nuclear program but did not indicate a schedule, said the official, who is familiar with the conversations.

The official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said the United States would not offer new incentives to bring North Korea to the table, but that participation could bring it help with its energy crisis and multilateral security guarantees.

Other participants in the six-nation talks -- Russia, China, South Korea and Japan -- are "in sync" on what North Korea calls "compensation" and the United States refers to as "corresponding measures," the official said.

"With [North Korean] denuclearization will come a very rich basket of economic and other incentives that would facilitate their economic development," the official said.

"The pieces are all there. They just need to show up."

U.S. and North Korean officials met Nov. 30 in New York as part of an ongoing effort to restart the talks. The negotiations halted in June after the North Koreans "walked away from this process, and we were very surprised, to be very honest," the official said.

Joseph DeTrani, the U.S. envoy for the talks, subsequently has been touring the region. He met with South Korean officials on Wednesday after arriving from Beijing and is scheduled to meet with Japanese officials today.

South Korea's Chosun Ilbo daily reported today that at the meeting in New York North Korea expressed willingness to continue the talks.

Quoting a senior State Department official in Seoul, the newspaper said Washington offered to consider removing North Korea from the U.S. list of states sponsoring terrorism if Pyongyang abandons its nuclear weapons program.

The United States announced in October 2002 that North Korea admitted it was enriching uranium secretly, in violation of a 1994 agreement. There have been three rounds of unsuccessful six-party talks since August 2003.

Of late, South Korea and China have been appealing for a more flexible approach.

Observers said the U.S. presidential election might have been a factor in the stalled talks, but North Korea denied it. Yesterday, Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, who made a rare visit to

Pyongyang in August, told Reuters news agency that there were no signs Pyongyang would resume the talks before President Bush's inauguration on Jan. 20.

On Sunday, North Korea said the United States reneged on an agreement reached in the third round of the talks.

"The stalemate was attributable to the fact that the present U.S. administration destroyed the groundwork of the talks," said the Korean Central News Agency, one of Pyongyang's official news outlets.

North Korea also has cited a "hostile" attitude from the United States, including passage of the North Korean Human Rights Act in October. Pyongyang has not directly expressed its criticism to Washington's representatives, the U.S. official said.

"I can assure you, at least from where I sit, we're not talking about hostile -- we're speaking to values," the official said. "The European Union has a dialogue with [North Korea] on human rights issues, and we would like to do the same."

The law authorizes financial support for nongovernmental groups aiding North Korean refugees and projects such as distributing radios in the communist country. Some South Korean lawmakers have complained that the measure undermines their effort at economic engagement with North Korea.

But the law "speaks to the values of the United States," the U.S. official said. "This is an issue that is very critical for the United States."

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