

Bush in Asia

Bush eyes 'evil' N. Korea at DMZ

President, aides join front-line troops for lunch

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DEMILITARIZED ZONE — Viewing North Korea's treeless hills and dozens of U.S. soldiers defending South Korea, President Bush surprised onlookers Wednesday by repeating his assertion that the communist country is "evil."

Bush, during his first visit to South Korea, was briefed by U.S. soldiers in a bunker protected by bulletproof glass as he peered at a gigantic North Korean flag flying about a mile away across the border.

When told two U.S. soldiers were hacked to death with axes by North Korean soldiers in 1976 after trying to trim trees in the border zone, Bush turned to reporters.

"You hear that?" Bush shouted to reporters. "No wonder I think they're evil."

The comment sent a charge through the attending press corps, who quickly dialed and repeated the word "evil" into their cell phones. Bush had backed off somewhat from strong statements during his sensitive summit with South Korean president Kim Dae-jung after his now-famed "axis of evil" speech spurred scrutiny.

Bush's motorcade passed through Camp Bonifas — named after one of the U.S. soldiers killed in the tree-trimming incident — before lunching with soldiers at Observation Post Ouellette. The U.S.-manned guard post sits about 25 meters from rusted yellow signs marking the official border between north and south.

Navy Commander Michael D. Greenwood, who studies North Korea for U.S. Forces Korea, briefed Bush in the bunker about the North Korean military, such as its vast special operations forces, missile program and conventional military.

They briefly eyed a 20-mile arc of North Korean territory and the arms the country has arrayed there, Greenwood said.

"We saw a full example of all of what North Korea is capable of doing," said Greenwood, who described the president as a warm person. "It seemed to have made a difference. He seemed to react."

About 37,000 U.S. servicemembers are stationed in South Korea as a deterrent force, in place since the end of the Korean War in 1953. The soldiers on this tiny, olive-green outpost, consisting of a network of camouflaged bunkers in the Demilitarized Zone, spend long hours staring north.

The outpost affords a panoram-



JEREMY KIRK/Stars and Stripes

President Bush dines Wednesday with Spc. Douglas R. Brox, left, and Spc. Darrell L. Glover at Observation Post Ouellette along the Demilitarized Zone.

ic view, including various deteriorating buildings on the north side. It's hardly pretty. All the trees have been cut on the hillsides facing south.

"The North Koreans have systematically decimated the vegetation and the mountains," said Lt. Col. Stephen M. Tharp, assistant secretary for the UNC Military

Armistice Commission. "Now they don't let it grow because they use it for food and fuel."

After viewing the North, Bush moved to a tiny dining hall and ate a submarine sandwich and chips with soldiers. Bush admonished photographers who crowded in the hall, firing their cameras. At Bush's request, aides

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Stationed at DMZ



shoed them away.

Bush, along with Secretary of State Colin Powell and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, shook every soldier's hand before dining, said Sgt. Joseph Rhone.

Rhone sat across from Powell, who, during their conversation, revealed that he served with the 2nd Infantry Division at Camp Casey after serving in Vietnam.

Powell also asked soldiers if they were using the Army's education benefits.

"I was blown away," said the 33-year-old Rhone, of the UNC Security Battalion. "It was awesome."

One soldier asked Bush about his "evil" speech, but Rice answered.

The soldier asked why the international community was so excited about the terminology "axis of evil," said Staff Sgt. Aaron Hammond, also of the UNC Security Battalion.

"The president wondered about that himself," Hammond said. "The national security advisor kind of answered that question for him." Rice said the international community "took it kind of like a warning shot."

U.S. soldiers in this battalion

would be the first to field the brunt of any conflict between the two Koreas. Although often characterized as the most dangerous place in the world by military here, soldiers described duty along this wooded swath of land as quiet.

"It's peaceful at night sometimes," said 19-year-old Pfc. Joshua Burnette. "You hear soft music."

The music is provided by the North Koreans, who intermittently blare propaganda and classical music through enormous speakers aimed at the south.

Many soldiers say it takes a while to acclimate to life at Camp Bonifas, which has no females and is miles from any entertainment district. Soldiers work six days a week and train hard. But the looming threat — often measured in just meters away — just wears off after while, they say.

"Sometimes if I stand back and think about it, I realize that something could happen, and we obviously are the front line of defense here along with the 1st Republic of Korea division," Hammond said. "But I'm a member of a great organization. I'm well-trained. I know the soldiers around me are very well trained."

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