

After nuclear test, North Korea plans to launch satellite this month

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Seoul: Weeks after its fourth nuclear test, North Korea announced plans Tuesday to launch an Earth observation satellite on a rocket later this month, in what critics see as a covert test of banned technology for a ballistic missile that could strike the U.S. mainland.

An official at the London-based International Maritime Organization said North Korea declared that the launch would be conducted between Feb. 8 and 25, between 7 a.m. and noon Pyongyang time. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because she hadn't been authorized to speak publicly yet.

A South Korean official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of office rules, said Seoul was also informed of the plans, and estimated that the first stage of the rocket would fall off the west coast of South Korea, more debris would land near the South's Jeju Island, and the second stage would land off the Philippines' east coast.

North Korea's last long-range rocket launch, in December 2012, was seen as having successfully put the country's first satellite into orbit after a string of failures. The North also told international agencies before that launch of its plans. Each new rocket launch improves North Korea's missile technology, which is crucial for its goal of developing a nuclear-armed missile capable of hitting the U.S. mainland.

North Korea, an autocracy run by the same family since 1948, is estimated to have a handful of crude nuclear devices and an impressive array of short- and medium-range missiles, but it closely guards details about its nuclear and missile programs. This means there is considerable debate by outsiders about whether it can produce nuclear bombs small enough to place on a missile, or missiles that can reliably deliver their bombs to faraway targets.

North Korea has spent decades trying to develop operational nuclear weapons. It calls its rocket launches satellite missions, but the U.N., the United States, South Korea and others say they are meant to test ballistic missile technology. The U.N. Security Council prohibits North Korea from nuclear and ballistic missile activity.

The North's Jan. 6 nuclear test has led to another push in the U.N. to tighten sanctions, something that followed North Korea's 2012 rocket launch and its 2013 third nuclear test. The North followed that test with an escalating campaign of bombast that included threats to fire nuclear missiles at the United States and South Korea.

North Korea has said that plutonium and highly enriched uranium facilities at its main Nyongbyon nuclear complex are in operation and that its scientists have improved "the levels of nuclear weapons with various missions in quality and quantity."

But just what is happening at Nyongbyon is unclear. North Korea booted out international inspectors in 2009, and independent assessments by outside experts since then have been spotty.

- AP