

## **'Will halt nuke tests if US stops South Korea drills' says North Korea**

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**New York:** North Korea's foreign minister said on Saturday in an interview with The Associated Press that his country is ready to halt its nuclear tests if the United States suspends its annual military exercises with South Korea.

He also defended the country's right to maintain a nuclear deterrent and warned that North Korea won't be cowed by international sanctions. And for those waiting for the North's regime to collapse, he had this to say: Don't hold your breath.

Foreign Minister Ri Su Yong, in his first interview with a Western news organisation, held firm to Pyongyang's longstanding position that the US drove his country to develop nuclear weapons as an act of self-defense. At the same time, he suggested that suspending the military exercises with Seoul could open the door to talks and reduced tensions.

"If we continue on this path of confrontation, this will lead to very catastrophic results, not only for the two countries but for the whole entire world as well," he said, speaking in Korean through an interpreter. "It is really crucial for the United States government to withdraw its hostile policy against the DPRK and as an expression of this stop the military exercises, war exercises, in the Korean Peninsula. Then we will respond likewise." DPRK is an abbreviation for North Korea's official name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Ri, who spoke calmly and in measured words, a contrast to the often bombastic verbiage used by the North's media, claimed the North's proposal was "every logical."

"Stop the nuclear war exercises in the Korean Peninsula, then we should also cease our nuclear tests," he said, during the interview, conducted in the country's diplomatic mission to the United Nations. He spoke beneath portraits of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, North Korea's two previous leaders "the grandfather and father of current leader Kim Jong Un.

If the exercises are halted "for some period, for some years," he added, "new opportunities may arise for the two countries and for the whole entire world as well."

Ri's comments to the AP came just hours after North Korea test-fired a ballistic missile from a submarine in its latest show of defiance as the US-South Korea exercises wind down. He referred to the launch in the context of current tensions caused by the military exercises. "The escalation of this military exercise level has reached its top level. And I think it's not bad" as the other side is going for the climax "why not us, too, to that level as well?"

It is extremely rare for top North Korean officials to give interviews to foreign media, and particularly with Western news organizations.

Ri's proposal, which he said he hoped US policymakers would heed, may well fall on deaf ears. North Korea, which sees the US-South Korean exercises as a rehearsal for invasion, has floated similar proposals to Washington in the past but the US has insisted the North give up its nuclear weapons program first before any negotiations. The result has been a stalemate between the two countries that Ri said has put the peninsula at the crossroads of a thermonuclear war.

In response to Ri's remarks, a US State Department official defended the military exercises as demonstrating the US commitment to its alliance with the South and said they enhance the combat readiness, flexibility and capabilities of the alliance.

“We call again on North Korea to refrain from actions and rhetoric that further raise tensions in the region and focus instead on taking concrete steps toward fulfilling its international commitments and obligations,” said Katina Adams, a spokeswoman for the State Department’s Bureau of East Asia and Pacific Affairs.

Sanctions, Ri said, won’t sway the North.

“If they believe they can actually frustrate us with sanctions, they are totally mistaken,” he said. “The more pressure you put on to something, the more emotionally you react to stand up against it. And this is important for the American policymakers to be aware of.”

Ri, in New York to attend a United Nations’ meeting on sustainable development, said the possibility of conflict has increased significantly this year because the exercises have taken on what Pyongyang sees as a more aggressive and threatening tone “including training to conduct precision “decapitation” strikes on North Korea’s leadership.

This year’s exercises are the biggest ever, involving about 300,000 troops. Washington and Seoul say they beefed up the manoeuvres after North Korea conducted its fifth nuclear test, in January, which also brought a new round of tough sanctions by the UN down on Pyongyang’s head. The exercises are set to continue through the end of the month.

Pyongyang, meanwhile, has responded with a series of missile launches and statements in its media that the country has developed its long-range ballistic missile and nuclear warhead technologies to the point that they now present a credible deterrent and could even be used against targets on the US mainland, though not all foreign analysts accept that claim.

- AP