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DPRK' s suspension of nuclear activities raises hopes for six-party talks

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 29 (Xinhua) -- The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) said Wednesday that it would suspend nuclear tests, long-range missile launches, and uranium enrichment activities as agreed with the United States in recent bilateral talks.

Experts here believe that the announcement is both encouraging and significant, raising real hopes for the revival of the long-stalled six-party talks and presenting an opportunity to reduce tensions on the Korean peninsula.

Earlier the day, a DPRK foreign ministry spokesman told the official news agency KCNA: "The DPRK, upon request by the U.S. and with a view to maintaining a positive atmosphere for the DPRK-U.S. high-level talks, agreed to a moratorium on nuclear tests, long-range missile launches, and uranium enrichment activity at Nyongbyon and will allow the IAEA to monitor the moratorium on uranium enrichment while productive dialogues continue."

Almost simultaneously in Washington, the U.S. government confirmed DPRK's announcement. State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said that it reflected "important, if limited, progress," despite Washington's ongoing "profound concerns" regarding DPRK's behaviors.

At a Senate hearing on Wednesday, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in a relatively positive response, described DPRK's move as a "modest first step in the right direction".

Analysts here in the United States viewed DPRK's decision to suspend nuclear activities as an indication of easing tensions between Washington and Pyongyang.

Ted Carpenter, senior fellow with the Washington-based Cato Institute, saw the moratorium on nuclear and missile activities and the agreement for UN inspections as both "encouraging and significant."

"It suggests that the new DPRK leadership may be willing to be more flexible on these issues, and that aspect has the potential to reduce tensions on the Korean Peninsula," he told Xinhua.

The announcement came after the DPRK and U.S. delegations met in Beijing on Feb. 23-24 for the third round of exploratory talks in an effort to resume the six-party talks. The two sides had previously met in July and October last year in New York and Geneva respectively.

The six-party talks, a mechanism involves the DPRK, the Republic of Korea, the United States, China, Japan and Russia, were launched in 2003, but got stalled in December 2008. The DPRK quit the talks in April 2009.

Richard Bush, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, also said the progress was "modestly significant."

He told Xinhua that these latest moves by DPRK demonstrated some degree of "seriousness and sincerity" that are acceptable for Washington and its allies to move into further negotiations.

Carpenter even went further by saying "This development is, by far, the best news we have had regarding security issues on the Korean Peninsula and U.S.-DPRK diplomacy in more than two years."

However, despite media's general focus on DPRK's commitment, it is also noteworthy that the breakthrough did not come unilaterally, but rather in some form of a trade-off between Pyongyang and Washington. Experts had long pointed out that the United States also had an interest in engaging DPRK in negotiations for fear of further potential provocative behaviors from Pyongyang.

In exchange for DPRK's suspension of nuclear activities, the U.S. State Department said that Washington has agreed to meet with DPRK to finalize the details to move forward with proposed American food aid of "240,000 metric tons of nutritional assistance".

Carpenter, in his interpretation, noted that the food aid indicated that the Obama administration is willing to "reward significant DPRK conciliatory actions with corresponding conciliatory steps from the United States".

The State Department also said that the United States, during the talks in Beijing last week, reaffirmed that "it does not have hostile intent toward the DPRK and is prepared to take steps to improve our bilateral relationship in the spirit of mutual respect for sovereignty and equality."

Furthermore, the United States reaffirmed its commitment to the September 19, 2005 Joint Statement and recognized the 1953 Armistice Agreement as the "cornerstone of peace and stability" on the Korean Peninsula.

Despite the general positive response, U.S. officials and analysts sounded a cautious tone. Clinton said at the Wednesday hearing that the United States "will be watching closely, and judging North Korea's new leaders by their actions".

Richard Bush, in an effort to avoid overplaying the significance of the progress, said these new moves are only "confidence-building measures" and "an initial step on a path towards serious negotiations".