

NOTE #5

DATE: January 1993
PLACE: Atlanta, Georgia
Event: Meeting with DPRK Ambassador Ho Jong at Carter Center
Key Participants: Ambassador Ho Jong, State Department North Korea Affairs Officer C. Kenneth Quinones, Carter Center Staff

In late January 1993, retired Ambassador Creekmore, adviser to former US President Carter invited me to the Carter Center in Atlanta, Georgia to discuss US-DPRK relations. Amb. Creekmore had recently retired from the U.S. Foreign Service and served as a close adviser to Carter regarding foreign policy issues.

While meeting with Creekmore at the Carter Center, he asked if I would be willing to also meet with DPRK Amb. Ho Jong who also happened to be visiting the Center that day. Creekmore explained that the DPRK had repeatedly invited President Carter to visit Pyongyang to serve as an intermediary between the DPRK and US governments regarding the developing nuclear crisis.

Just before my visit to the Carter Center, the International Atomic Energy Agency Board of Governors had voted to report to the United Nations Security Council that North Korea was not in compliance with its obligations as a member of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). This was a major escalation of the tensions that had begun to develop in August 1992 when North Korea refused to allow IAEA inspectors to take samples of nuclear waste stored at Yongbyon.

The purpose of these samples was to determine the amount of plutonium that North Korea had previously produced. IAEA scientists believed that evidence collected during the first IAEA inspection in June 1992 showed that the North Korea had not accurately declared to the IAEA how much plutonium it had previously produced. Rather than accuse the DPRK of lying, the IAEA maintained that it was possible its original analysis was inaccurate but to make an accurate determination of plutonium production, additional samples of nuclear waste chemicals needed to be collected from the nuclear waste sites at Yongbyon Nuclear Research Center. The DPRK military in August 1992 had hidden these waste sites under elaborate camouflage, arousing international suspicions about North Korea's honesty.

The United States had maintained since August 1992 a policy of gradually increasing the diplomatic pressure on Pyongyang in the hope of winning its cooperation with the IAEA. This was why I had been sent to meet DPRK Foreign Minister Kim Yongnam in September, the October meeting in Washington, DC in October and the December visit to Pyongyang.

The possible meeting with Ho Jong at the Carter Center came as a surprise to me. I called the Department of State to ask for instructions. After a couple of hours, I was authorized to meet with Ho Jong and given instructions about what to discuss with him.

Meanwhile, Ho Jong met with the Carter Center staff to extend an invitation to President Carter to visit Pyongyang as soon as possible. The State Department had

long known of Pyongyang's wish. I had served as the liaison between the State Department and the Carter Center. The US government position remained that President Carter was not in a position to visit the DPRK because of prior commitments. We wanted to hold open the possibility of a future visit, but only at a time that the US government deemed the situation appropriate.

About 2 PM the afternoon of my visit, I met Ho Jong privately at the Carter Center. We met in a small windowless office for over one hour. Ho picked the location to assure him that no secret microphone had been installed prior to our meeting. So far as I know, there was no recording made of the meeting. I never worked that way when dealing with either North or South Koreans.

It was unusual, however, that Ho and I met without any note taker. Usually North Korean officials always insist on having at least one other North Korean with them but the State Department had not approved for a second DPRK official to accompany Ho. Then, as now, no DPRK official is allowed to travel more than 25 miles from Washington Square in Manhattan unless the State Department issues written permission. Later, I made it a practice to always have another American with me when I met with the North Koreans. My purpose was to protect myself from accusations being made by another US government official claiming that I was too nice to the North Koreans. Actually, my view was to treat all foreign diplomats like diplomats whether they were North Korean or otherwise.

As usual, he was polite but very curious about why I was visiting the center. I candidly told him that I had been invited to the center to advise the staff regarding North Korea's invitation for Carter to visit Pyongyang. This surprised Ho Jong who seemed to naively believe that his contact with the center was "private" since at the time a Republican (Bush) had been president and now that a Democrat (Clinton) had become president, maybe Clinton would be more willing to allow Carter to visit the DPRK. Obviously the North Koreans at that time had a rather limited understanding about the US government and US politics.

As I was authorized to do, I asked Ho Jong what the DPRK expected in return for cooperation with the IAEA. His answer first repeated the DPRK's official position, i.e. the IAEA was prejudiced against the DPRK and not acting "in an impartial manner." He declared that the IAEA's demands for inspection infringed on the DPRK's "sovereignty." He then said that his government wanted to establish normal relations with the USA but could do so only so long as the USA respected the DPRK's sovereignty. He also accused the USA of secretly working behind the scene to manipulate the IAEA (a probably reference to USA diplomatic efforts at the IAEA's headquarters in Vienna, Austria to rally votes supportive of the US position aimed at compelling North Korea's cooperation). Finally, he warned that the forthcoming annual US-ROK joint military exercise "Team Spirit" would poison the atmosphere and intensify tensions in Northeast Asia. He closed by admitting that his government had invited Carter to Pyongyang but that no answer had yet been given.

After our meeting concluded, Ho Jong returned to New York and I spent that evening with the South Korea Consul General to Atlanta who was extremely interested in learning about my meeting with Ho Jong. As was then routine policy, I briefed the Consul General about the meeting. We believed at that time the best policy for the

US government was to maintain complete transparency in our relationship with the DPRK by briefing the ROK government after each encounter.

This and my earlier experiences of meeting North and South Koreans convinced me that no matter what we told each side, Koreans, whether from the South or North, would never completely trust Americans.

This was the final contact with North Korea by a U.S. government official until North Korea declared on March 11, 1993 that it would withdraw from the NPT. The announcement followed the IAEA Board of Governors' vote to censure the DPRK for non-compliance with its NPT responsibilities, specifically refusal to allow the IAEA to conduct a "special inspection" of the Yongbyon Nuclear Facility. Pyongyang claimed such a "special inspection," never before called for by the IAEA was an infringement on the DPRK's sovereignty.

Today, September 2008, the issued delaying further progress in the Six Party Talks is exactly the same. Now the USA is pressing the DPRK to conform to "international standards" regarding the process of verification. This term refers to the IAEA's requirement that it be able to take samples of nuclear waste material at Yongbyon to analyze and determine the accuracy of North Korea's declaration of how much plutonium it now has. The issue is identical, then and now.

C. Kenneth Quinones
September 8, 2008
Akita, Japan