

North Korea Threatens U.S. Military Bases in Pacific
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SEOUL, South Korea — North Korea on Thursday threatened to attack American military bases in Japan and on the Pacific island of Guam in retaliation for recent training missions by American B-52 bombers over South Korea.

While the North has threatened American forces in Guam before, the latest warning comes amid heightened tension on the peninsula after a North Korean nuclear test last month and the imposition of United Nations sanctions that have infuriated Pyongyang.

Those tensions might rise again because of another United Nations action on Thursday: Its Human Rights Council created a commission to look into allegations of human rights violations in North Korea, including the incarceration of political prisoners at labor camps and torture.

Navi Pillay, the United Nations high commissioner for human rights, has been calling for such an investigation for months, fearful that the world's preoccupation with the North's growing nuclear arsenal overshadowed discussions of a human rights situation she called "the worst in the whole world" in an interview with the news agency Reuters.

The commission will be somewhat limited in what it can do. It is unlikely to get access to North Korea, a police state, and it remains unclear what court would take up its findings. But Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch, told Radio Australia that "collecting the evidence is the first step toward putting pressure on the international community, and whoever North Korea's defenders are, to ultimately acquiesce in prosecution" of what he called "the terrible atrocities that are routinely committed in North Korea."

An estimated 1 in 120 North Koreans are imprisoned in gulags, where defectors from the country say starvation, forced labor and torture are endemic.

The threats against American troops on Thursday were the latest in a stream of vitriol from the North in the wake of the United Nations sanctions. Japanese and American Pacific bases are within range of North Korea's medium-range missiles, according to South Korean officials.

Nuclear-capable B-52 bombers that upset the North have flown missions over South Korea in the past as part of joint military exercises. But this month, the Pentagon took the rare action of announcing those missions to reaffirm the United States' "nuclear umbrella" for South Korea and Japan at a time of rising anxiety over the North's nuclear threats.

On Thursday, a spokesman for the Supreme Command of the North Korean People's Army told the state-run Korean Central News Agency that "the U.S. should not forget that the Andersen Air Force Base on Guam, where B-52s take off, and naval bases in Japan proper and Okinawa, where nuclear-powered submarines are launched, are within the striking range of the D.P.R.K.'s precision strike means."

He added, without elaborating, "Now that the U.S. started open nuclear blackmail and threat, the D.P.R.K., too, will move to take corresponding military actions," referring to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the North's official name.

State radio also blared air-raid warnings in North Korea. Until the 1990s, air-raid drills were a popular tool for the North Korean government to highlight the perceived threat of an American invasion and to instill in its people a sense of crisis and solidarity.

One of the two joint American and South Korean military exercises that have angered North Korea ended Thursday. But Seoul and Washington remained alert over the possibility that the North might follow up on some of its vaguely worded threats to attack the allies. The North Koreans have also been angry about what they expected to be an unfavorable outcome in the Human Rights Council.

On March 11, the North's official party paper, The Rodong Sinmun, said the council's expected move to adopt the resolution, coupled with the United Nations sanctions, would "raise tensions and ignite a war to invade the North." It vowed to deliver "a merciless mace-blow" on "traitors" in South Korea.

On Thursday, North Korea's ambassador, So Se Pyong, rejected the resolution as "an instrument that serves the political purposes of the hostile forces in their attempt to discredit the image" of his country. He denied human rights abuses existed there.

Cho Tae-young, a South Korean Foreign Ministry spokesman, said, "We hope that the establishment of the commission of inquiry through this resolution will contribute to the improvement of human rights in North Korea."

The commission will include the Indonesian lawyer Marzuki Darusman, who wrote a report for the council citing the kidnapping of foreigners and the system of labor camps. He said the situation had

worsened since the North's new young leader, Kim Jong-un, took over after his father's death in December 2011.

The European Union and Japan sponsored the resolution calling for the commission, and the United States backed it. With no Chinese or Russian vote on the 47-member council, North Korea had no country willing to oppose the inquiry.

Mr. Roth of Human Rights Watch acknowledged the difficulties facing investigators. "There is no international tribunal that has jurisdiction over North Korea," he told Radio Australia. "Theoretically, the International Criminal Court could be brought in with a resolution from the U.N. Security Council, yet China would probably veto that at this stage."

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