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White House Gives Food to North Korea, but Won't Discuss Kim's 2002 Message

By Dafna Linzer

WASHINGTON - The Bush administration announced Wednesday that it will donate 50,000 tons of food aid to North Korea, just days after the reclusive state indicated a willingness to return to regional talks over its nuclear program.

The White House said the aid is a humanitarian gesture unrelated to the political climate or to the potential for renewed talks.

At the same time, officials declined to comment on revelations Wednesday that the administration received an overture from North Korean leader Kim Jong Il in November 2002, in which he said he wanted to resolve a budding nuclear crisis between the two countries.

President Bush has struggled without success to roll back significant nuclear advances in North Korea, which is judged by the intelligence community to have the ability to make as many as eight nuclear devices.

Regional talks to address the issue have been on hold for a year because of the North's refusal to continue attending meetings that have yielded few results.

White House officials have said that the talks, which include China, South Korea, Japan and Russia, are the best way forward and that the United States will not offer incentives or negotiate directly with Pyongyang until it decides to dismantle its nuclear program.

That stance has drawn criticism from some former U.S. officials and experts, who worry it has done little to curb the danger posed by North Korea's arsenal.

They have urged the White House to soften its anti-Pyongyang rhetoric and provide assurances to the North that it does not plan to attack.

On Wednesday, Donald Gregg, who served as ambassador to South Korea under President George H.W. Bush, and Don Oberdorfer, a former Washington Post reporter and now journalist-in-residence at the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University, revealed in an opinion piece in the Post that they had delivered a message in late 2002 from Kim to the White House.

"If the United States recognizes our sovereignty and assures nonaggression, it is our view that we should be able to find a way to resolve the nuclear issue in compliance with the demands of a new century," Kim wrote in the secret note.

"If the United States makes a bold decision, we will respond accordingly."

Kim's note came one month after the White House confronted North Korea over a secret uranium-enrichment facility it had built in violation of an agreement Pyongyang had signed to halt its nuclear activities.

Gregg and Oberdorfer reprinted excerpts from the message in their piece Wednesday, in which they urged the administration to negotiate directly with North Korea.

They said in interviews Wednesday that they gave the 2002 message from Kim to Stephen Hadley, then deputy national security adviser.

They said Hadley reacted negatively to the message, saying the United States did not want to reward North Korea's bad behavior. But Hadley promised to take the issue up with Condoleezza Rice, whom he later succeeded as national security adviser, and with the president, they said.

Gregg and Oberdorfer recalled they had also discussed the offer with Richard Armitage, then deputy secretary of state. "Rich assured us it was being taken seriously," Oberdorfer said.