Third Round of 6-Party Nuke Talks to Begin June 23

By Reuben Staines & Ryu Jin
Staff Reporters

The third round of six-party talks on the North Korean nuclear standoff will likely take place from June 23-25 in Beijing, a Seoul official said on Thursday.

The six countries _ the two Koreas, the United States, Japan, Russia and the host China _ will also hold a two-day working-group meeting involving lower-level officials from June 21 to lay the groundwork for the plenary session, the official added asking not to be named.

According to the source, China has recently informed the other five nations of the schedule and received positive answers from them.

``The date for the multilateral talks is not fixed yet, but it is highly likely the plenary talks will be held on June 23-25," he said. "China will finalize the schedule and make an official announcement this week."

The schedule for the second round of six-way parley, which ended in late February without clear breakthrough, had also been fixed early in that month. But it is unclear whether Beijing's offer for the upcoming round of talks included a closing date for the main session.

At the last round of talks, the six nations agreed to set up a working-group meeting before main delegates meet again by the end of June. Deputy chief delegates from the six nations got together last month to hold the first working-group talks.

Earlier in the day, South Korea's Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon said he expected the new round of six-party talks to occur by the end of June.

``The third six-party talks will likely be held before the end of this month as previously agreed," he said during a speech at an international conference organized by the Asia-Europe Foundation.

The nuclear dispute began in October 2002 after U.S. officials said the North admitted to having a secret nuclear weapons program in violation of international agreements.

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