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North Korea

N. Korea Condemned By Foreign Ministers

Shu-Ching Jean Chen 05.28.09, 3:29 AM ET

Have Kim Jong Il and his despotic North Korean regime lost touch with the outside world? Ask the 43 foreign ministers from Asia and Europe who gathered for an annual confab in Hanoi this week, only to find North Korea unexpectedly at the top of the agenda.

Officials converged in Vietnam for the Asia-Europe Meeting, or ASEM, to discuss a range of issues -- from counter-terrorism, energy security, transport and religion, to subjects of global urgency, such as swine flu and the financial crisis.

Diplomats were alarmed by North Korea's bellicose nuclear adventurism and the grave implications for the wider world after North Korea tested a nuclear device as well as short-range missiles earlier this week.

Cambodia's foreign minister, Hor Namhong, said the nuclear test would "further undermine the non-proliferation of the weapons of mass destruction."

One diplomat said worries over North Korea's action had hijacked the Hanoi conference's agenda right from the beginning, so much that it became an unwelcome distraction when they should have devoted more time exchanging views on topics of immediate concern: the need to promote cross-border trade and investment liberalization in spite of the financial crisis and the temptation to pursue protectionist policies, and the rising threat of global warming faced by member countries.

In the end, foreign ministers from the 43 countries decided to issue an unequivocal joint statement to "condemn the underground nuclear test... which constitutes a clear violation of the Six-Party agreements and the relevant United National Security Council resolutions and decisions."

They also "strongly urge" North Korea not to conduct any further nuclear tests, and call on North Korea to immediately return to the Six-Party Talks.

The ministers represented 15 European Union countries, the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, plus the three largest economies in North Asia -- China, Japan and South Korea -- as well as India, Mongolia, Pakistan and smaller Asian countries such as Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar.

Together they represent 58% of the world's population, 50% of the global GDP and 60% of global trade.

U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates met with some of the Asian foreign ministers in Singapore to discuss what U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton called North Korea's "provocative and belligerent" behavior.

North Korea threatened to attack South Korea if it interfered with its northern neighbor's shipping. The new threats came after South Korea announced that it had joined the Proliferation Security Initiative, a U.S.-led group of nations that pledge to stop ships carrying nuclear bomb material.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.