

Dempsey: N. Korea Threats Fit Long Pattern

BY ROBERT BURNS
AP National Security Writer

STUTTGART, Germany — North Korea’s bellicose rhetoric and threats, while worrisome, appear to fit a decadeslong pattern of provocation followed by uneasy peace, the top U.S. military officer said Friday.

“I wouldn’t say I see anything to lead me to believe that this is a different kind of cycle,” Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said in an interview after speaking at a ceremony installing Gen. David Rodriguez as chief of U.S. Africa Command.

Dempsey’s remarks suggested that he does not believe the situation is headed toward war, despite a series of threatening statements by the North, including a declaration this week that its military is authorized to launch a nuclear attack on the United States.

Other U.S. officials have said this week they see no North Korean preparations for large-scale military action, but White House spokesman Jay Carney said a missile launch wasn’t unexpected.

“We would not be surprised to see them take such an action,” he told. “We have seen them launch missiles in the past.”

Dempsey called the North’s nuclear threat “just reckless” and contrasted such talk with what he described as measured moves by the U.S. to deter the North and to reassure South Korea.

“Our moves have been largely defensive and exclusively intended to reassure our allies,” he said, referring in part to the announcement that a more advanced missile defense system, designed to knock down hostile missiles in the upper atmosphere and beyond, would be deployed to Guam, a U.S. territory in the Pacific that hosts U.S. forces.

The U.S. also has made a point of highlight-

ing aspects of an annual U.S.-South Korean military exercise that included a practice bombing run over South Korea by B-2 stealth bombers, as well as flights of B-52 bombers and the presence of F-22 stealth fighter planes. Two of the Navy’s missile-defense ships were positioned closer to the Korean peninsula, and the Pentagon has announced plans to beef up its U.S.-based missile defenses.

Dempsey said he does not foresee any further U.S. military moves in the near future.

Dempsey said he has talked in the past few days to the commander of the 28,500 U.S. troops in Korea, Gen. James Thurman, about the safety of forces and their families. He said Thurman has made no recommendation to evacuate any military dependents.

The U.S. and South Korea have been at odds with North Korea for more than a half century. The two sides fought a three-year war in the 1950s that ended in a truce, and the North has long complained that the U.S. intends to overthrow its leaders.

Washington is treaty-bound to come to South Korea’s defense if Seoul is attacked.

North Korea responded with fury to U.N. sanctions following its third nuclear test Feb. 12, and to the U.S.-South Korean military exercise known as Foal Eagle. Among other statements, it has threatened a nuclear strike against the U.S., declared that it has scrapped the Korean War truce, blocked South Koreans from entering a jointly run industrial park and announced that it will take new steps to produce more fuel for nuclear bombs.

Despite downplaying the threat of imminent war, Dempsey said there is no room to be casual about the current tensions on the Korean peninsula. He noted, for example, that the North’s threat to launch a nuclear attack on the U.S. “is new” and is worrisome, given the North’s development of ballistic missiles as

well as nuclear devices. He said it is not clear that they have reached the point where they can fit a nuclear warhead atop a missile that could reach distant targets.

“The combination of that makes it very reckless” to threaten a nuclear attack, he said.

Asked how the U.S. is dealing with that, he said, “We’ll live up to our alliance obligations and protect our national interests, and that’s not being bellicose, that’s being very matter-of-fact.”

Dempsey said another troublesome factor is the North’s young leader, Kim Jong Un, who came to power after his father’s death in December 2011 and is a grandson of North Korea’s founder, Kim Il Sung. He said U.S. officials do not know who in his inner circle influences Kim.

“Though we’ve always said that North Korea has been a bit opaque to us, in the past we’ve understood their leadership and the influencers a little better than we do today,” he said. “And so the extent to which this cycle (of provocation) is a little more unpredictable, it’s because of him. We know less about him. But the pattern is very similar.”

Dempsey said that in preparation for a trip to Beijing in a few weeks, he recently spoke by phone to his Chinese counterpart about the North Korea problem, among others, and that this will be on the agenda when he makes his first visit as Joint Chiefs chairman.

“What I’m not going to do is go over there and deliver the traditional talking point of: ‘You need to get your southern neighbor under control,’” he said, adding that it’s pretty clear China cannot compel North Korea to act differently.

“I would rather take the opportunity to gain a little deeper understanding of what are the Chinese issues” with the North Koreans, he said.

Budget Calls For 4 Percent Spending Increase At VA

BY KEVIN FREKING
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama’s budget proposal will include nearly a 14 percent spending increase for the section of the Department of Veterans Affairs responsible for attacking a growing backlog of disability claims — a problem that officials warned is likely to worsen in coming months.

All told, the VA would see a 4 percent increase, to \$63.5 billion, for such items as veterans’ medical care and research, technology and new construction. That does not include disability, pension and education benefits.

The president is also going to ask Congress, in his budget proposal next week, to make permanent tax credits for employers who hire unemployed veterans. The unemployment rate for veterans who have served since the onset of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan was 9.9 percent last year.

White House chief of staff Denis McDonough told reporters Friday that more money for the VA in tight budgetary times reflects Obama’s commitment to veterans.

Veterans receive disability compensation for injuries or illness incurred during their active military service. About 600,000 claims, or 70 percent, have been pending more than 125 days. That number has soared in recent years as more veterans have sought compensation and as the claims have become more complicated. VA Secretary Eric Shinseki also made it easier for veterans exposed to Agent Orange during the Vietnam War to get benefits, which caused the backlog to spike, starting in 2010.

McDonough said the White House was “taking a hard look” at a request to appoint a presidential commission to address the backlog, but meanwhile, Obama had instructed all agencies with experience in dealing with claims

to help the VA. “The president has made clear to us this is a national priority. Everybody who’s got expertise, experience to bring to this fight to support (Shinseki) is going to be expected to be there,” McDonough said.

Shinseki has set a goal of eliminating the backlog in 2015. But officials also cautioned that they could not say when the number of claims pending longer than 125 days would start to go down.

“I think I can say without fear of contradiction that you will be seeing additions to the backlog for the coming months,” McDonough said.

Shinseki said the key to improving VA services was to eliminate paper records through a new computer system that is being rolled out to VA regional offices throughout the country. The Veterans Benefits Administration, which oversees the disability claims, would get up to \$2.5 billion, a 13.6 percent increase, in the coming fiscal year if Congress goes along with the request.

Over the years, the VA has consistently underestimated the progress it projected to make on the backlog. Shinseki was asked why veterans should believe the agency now as it sticks with the mantra that the backlog will be broken in 2015. Shinseki said it has taken time to develop the computer system that will improve efficiency and speed the approval process.

“I’m pretty confident of the path that we’re on,” Shinseki said.

The budget also calls for a 7.2 percent increase for mental health care services as part of the overall \$63.5 billion budget. The proposed increase reflects concerns about ensuring that veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder have timely access to care.

Rep. Jeff Miller, R-Fla., chairman of the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, voiced skepticism that more money for the VA would improve results.

Judge Making Morning-After Pill Available To All

BY LAURAN NEERGAARD
AND LARRY NEUMEISTER
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The morning-after pill might become as easy to buy as aspirin.

In a scathing rebuke accusing the Obama administration of letting election-year politics trump science, a federal judge ruled Friday that there should be no age restrictions on the sale of emergency contraception without a doctor’s prescription.

Today, buyers must prove at the pharmacy that they’re 17 or older; everyone else must see a doctor first. U.S. District Judge Edward Korman of New York blasted the government’s decision on age limits as “arbitrary, capricious and unreasonable,” and ordered an end to the restrictions within 30 days.

The Justice Department was evaluating whether to appeal, and spokeswoman Allison Price said there would be a prompt decision.

President Barack Obama had supported the 2011 decision setting age limits, and White House spokesman Jay Carney said Friday the president hasn’t changed his position. “He believes it was the right common-sense approach to this issue,” Carney said.

If the court order stands, Plan B One-Step and its generic versions could move from behind pharmacy counters out to drug-store shelves — ending a decade-plus struggle by women’s groups for easier access to these pills, which can prevent pregnancy if taken soon enough after unprotected sex.

Saying the sales restrictions can make it hard for women of any age to buy the pills, Korman described the administration’s decision, in the year before the 2012 presidential and congressional

elections, as “politically motivated, scientifically unjustified and contrary to agency precedent.”

Women’s health specialists hailed the ruling.

“It has been clear for a long time that the medical and scientific community think this should be fully over the counter and is safe for women of all ages to use,” said Dr. Susan Wood, who resigned as FDA’s women’s health chief in 2005 to protest Bush administration foot-dragging over Plan B.

Half the nation’s pregnancies every year are unintended. Doctors’ groups say more access to morning-after pills — by putting them near the condoms and spermicides so people can learn about them and buy them quickly — could cut those numbers. They see little risk in overuse, as the pills cost \$40 to \$50 apiece.

“The fact that it’s over the counter does not make people have sex,” said Dr. Angela Diaz, director of New York’s Mount Sinai Adolescent Health Center. “Sixty percent of young people are sexually active by 12th grade, and the more tools we have to help them be responsible, the better.”

Social conservatives criticized the ruling.

“There is a real danger that Plan B may be given to young girls, under coercion or without their consent,” said Anna Higgins of the Family Research Council. “The involvement of parents and medical professionals acts as a safeguard for these young girls. However, today’s ruling removes these common-sense protections.”

Deirdre McQuade, spokeswoman for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said: “Plan B does not prevent or treat any disease, but makes young adolescent girls more available to sexual predators. The court’s action un-

dermines parents’ ability to protect their daughters from such exploitation and from the adverse effects of the drug itself.”

Absent an appeal or a government request for more time to prepare one, the ruling would take effect in 30 days, meaning that over-the-counter sales could start then.

The Food and Drug Administration actually was preparing to allow over-the-counter sale of Plan B One-Step with no age limits in late 2011 when Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius, in an unprecedented move, overruled her own scientists. Sebelius said some girls as young as 11 are physically capable of bearing children but shouldn’t be able to buy the pregnancy-preventing pill on their own.

The federal judge dismissed that argument.

“This case is not about the potential misuse of Plan B by 11-year-olds,” said Korman, who called the pills safe for girls but said the number using them “is likely to be minuscule” as less than 3 percent of girls under age 13 are sexually active.

He cited the Administrative Procedure Act as granting a judge the authority to set aside an agency’s rulings “if they are arbitrary, capricious, an abuse of discretion or otherwise not in accordance with law.”

Korman said regulation requires that when the FDA allows nonprescription drug sales, “the standards are the same for aspirin and for contraceptives” — and he ultimately determined that the government violated those standards in the case of Plan B.

“The decision that the agency was forced to make, contrary to its own policies and judgment, is not entitled to any deference,” Korman concluded. “Indeed, it is hardly clear that the secretary

had the power to issue the order, and if she did have that authority, her decision was arbitrary, capricious, and unreasonable.

It was the judge’s latest ruling in a lawsuit filed by the Center for Reproductive Rights and dating back to 2005 that pushed for unfettered over-the-counter access to Plan B.

Korman didn’t spare the FDA from criticism, citing “a strong showing of bad faith and improper political influence” going back to the Bush administration, when the center filed a citizen’s petition to try to get the agency to act. That was followed by the lawsuit.

“More than twelve years have passed since the citizen petition was filed and eight years since this lawsuit commenced,” Korman wrote in a decision dated Thursday and released Friday. “The FDA has engaged in intolerable delays in processing the petition. Indeed, it could accurately be described as an administrative agency filibuster.”

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