Beat: Travel

North Korean nuclear test may not be imminent, analysts say

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USPA News - Expectations that North Korea could soon conduct a fourth nuclear test may not be as imminent as previously thought, according to a new assessment released Tuesday by analysts at 38 North of the U.S.-Korea Institute at SAIS (USKI). Since early April, satellite imagery had shown an increase in activity at the Punggye-ri nuclear test site in North Hamgyong province, as well as claims from South Korea`s defense ministry that a nuclear test was imminent.

But 38 North analysts stated Tuesday that "it appears that a nuclear test is not imminent" and, if North Korea does intend to carry one out, it may still be weeks away. Satellite imagery taken in April of the Punggye-ri nuclear test site showed heightened activity in various parts of the facility, particularly around the South Portal. According to the U.S.-based Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS), however, North Korea has made preparations at the site before but did not carry out a test. 38 North analysts Nick Hansen and Jack Liu said Tuesday that recent satellite imagery continued to show activity in various parts of the nuclear test site, but none that would indicate a test is imminent or likely to occur in the near future. "Activity in the West Portal area includes continued excavation of a new tunnel that has been ongoing since May 2013. ... There is even a new rectangular area - possibly a garden - inside the fence to the north of the tunnel excavation," they said. "In short, the imagery shows activities, even the most mundane, that you would not expect if a test were imminent." The analysts, who have studied satellite imagery from the site for years, said there were several possible explanations for the recent activity at the site, including the possibility that North Korea may simply be upgrading existing facilities or carrying out maintenance after the end of winter. Other explanations may be political, they said. "The North Koreans may have decided to play the public attention generated by predictions of an imminent test for all it was worth," they said. "Given recent US-ROK joint exercises and the deterioration of relations with the Park Geun-hye administration, hyping the threat of an imminent test served as an important objective for Pyongyang, namely to never appear weak, and stay in the news headlines." Punggye-ri was also the site of North Korea`s plutonium-fueled nuclear tests in October 2006, May 2009 and February 2013. During Obama`s visit, amid speculation of a possible upcoming test, South Korean President Park Geun-hye said: "If North Korea is actually going to carry out the fourth nuclear test, that is going to change fundamentally the security landscape and I believe that all our efforts to resolve the nuclear issue through the Six-Party Talks is going to be completely dissolved," Park added: "There is a close linkage between the North Korean nuclear program and others, so I believe that North Korea`s nuclear capability is going to bring a serious threat to world peace, too. And about such an analysis, I believe this is not going to be a problem only for the Northeast Asia region; this is going to be a serious threat to global peace. And if such an event is going to be realized, the U.N., in order to uphold the peace, will have to impose very strong sanctions."

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UPA United Press Agency LTD

483 Green Lanes
UK, London N13NV 4BS
contact (at) unitedpressagency.com
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