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Test sparks N. Korea backlash in Japan

AP Associated Press

An ultra-right activist is stopped by security police officers after chanting anti-North Korean slogans with a bull horn at the gate of the headquarters of the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan, or Chongryon, Japan's biggest pro-North Korean organization in Tokyo, in this July 6, 2006 file photo. Harassment of Japan's insular North Korean community, the biggest outside the homeland or China, dates back decades. But animosity has flared to new levels since North Korea stunned the world earlier October by apparently testing its first-ever atomic bomb. (AP Photo/Shizuo Kambayashi, FILE)

By Hans Greimel, Associated Press Writer | October 24, 2006

TOKYO --When a bamboo grove mysteriously erupted in flames and nearly engulfed an office compound of Japan's biggest pro-North Korean organization, So Chung-on was hardly surprised.

Harassment of Japan's insular North Korean community, the biggest outside the homeland or China, dates back decades. But animosity has flared to new levels since North Korea stunned the world with its nuclear test.

"The atmosphere in Japan is now the worst," said So, director of international affairs at Chongryon, an umbrella group acting as de facto embassy for tens of thousands of ethnic Koreans who live in Asia's richest capitalist society yet see North Korea as home.

No one was hurt in the Oct. 17 arson attack, and the blaze was put out before it could torch local Chongryon offices. But it was one of several outbursts putting people on edge -- including angry protests outside Chongryon facilities, threatening phone calls to North Korea-backed private schools and a severed pinkie finger mailed to the group's headquarters with a note promising "punishment from heaven."

North Koreans in Japan have long been vilified as a communist fifth column, but with Tokyo leading a worldwide campaign to sanction Pyongyang for its nuclear test, they now stand in an unwanted spotlight.

Japan, lying within easy range of North Korean missiles, is especially jittery about its neighbor's atomic arsenal. After the Oct. 9 test, Tokyo banned North Korean imports, barred port entry of North Korean ships and prohibited most North Korean nationals from entering the country.

Chongryon has not commented on the nuclear test, but was quick to condemn the backlash.

The measures will likely strangle North Korean businesses in Japan and divide families with roots in both countries. It could also finally kill off reconciliation between rival camps of North and South Koreans in Japan.

"Koreans who have nothing to do with the nuclear test have become the victim," Chongryon said in a statement. "The ratcheting up of sanctions severely threatens the rights and lifestyle of Koreans in Japan."

There are some 600,000 ethnic Koreans among 127 million Japanese, most of them descendants of people who moved here voluntarily or by force during Japan's 1910-1945 colonial rule of the Korean peninsula. About 200,000 are affiliated with Pyongyang.

All Koreans in Japan face discrimination in Japan. All Koreans were stripped of their Japanese citizenship after World War II and those in Japan found themselves in a society that often looked down on them as former colonial subjects.

Yet given the long-standing animosity between Tokyo and Pyongyang, North Koreans face especially limited economic opportunities, confined to tight-knit community-run businesses. Students who attend North Korean schools find it all but impossible to enter public universities.

Chongryon functions like an embassy because Japan and North Korea have no diplomatic ties. Its walled headquarters in Tokyo is guarded by police. Inside, visitors are greeted by a giant mural of North Korea's founding father Kim Il Sung and his son, current leader Kim Jong Il.

The current backlash began in July, after North Korea conducted internationally condemned missile tests.

Since then, there have been 130 cases of harassment and intimidation against North Korean students, Chongryon said. The pace quickened after the nuclear test, with two arson attacks against Chongryon facilities, including the bamboo incident in the city of Mito.

Tokyo's sanctions are meant to squeeze North Korea's economy and pressure Pyongyang into giving up its nuclear ambitions. But in reality, North Korean trade with Japan tumbled 85 percent from 2001, to a paltry \$195 million last year. Analysts say any additional crackdown will have limited impact overseas.

But in Japan, it will dig deep into North Korean businesses that rely on importing manufactured goods like cheap men's suits, marine and agriculture products, like clams and mushrooms, and raw materials such as coal.

Meanwhile, banning North Korean ships will shut the doors on the most popular way for North Koreans to visit relatives back home, and the new immigration restrictions will further limit travel.

Chongryon's future is anything but bright, said David C. Kang, a North Korea expert at Dartmouth University.

Loyalty toward Chongryon started fading in the 1990s when North Korea's economy flat-lined and famines killed an estimated 2 million people. Then, in 2002, Kim Jong Il shocked the world by admitting North Korean agents had been kidnapping Japanese citizens to train communist spies.

Today, many North Koreans simply opt for South Korean or Japanese citizenship to escape the stigma.

Chongryon tried to bolster its support by striking a landmark reconciliation accord with the South Korean association in Japan earlier this year. But the nuclear crisis scuttled that too.

"The North Korean community is dwindling, for both assimilation in Japan and also because it's such a sinking ship," Kang said. ■

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