North Korea condemns new US sanctions

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North Korea denounced the new sanctions levelled against it by the United States last Friday, while once again denying that it had anything to do with the hacking at Sony Pictures Entertainment. The Obama administration has accused Pyongyang of involvement in the Sony hacking but has provided no evidence to support its allegations.

North Korea on Sunday called the US allegations "absurd." Its official media outlet, the Korean Central News Agency, carried a statement from a government spokesman saying: "The persistent and unilateral action taken by the White House to slap sanctions against the DPRK [Democratic People's Republic of Korea] patently proves that it is still not away from inveterate repugnance and hostility toward the DPRK."

The sanctions are directed at 10 individuals and three defense-related companies in North Korea, barring them from access to the American financial system. This includes the Reconnaissance General Bureau, an intelligence agency that the US claimed was responsible for "major cyber-operations." At the same time, the US stated that none of those targeted were involved in hacking Sony.

The latest sanctions mark an escalation by President Barack Obama of the US confrontation with North Korea. Last month, Obama announced that the US would respond "at a time and in a manner of our choosing," after accusing North Korea of targeting Sony in response to the movie, The Interview, which depicts the fictional assassination of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.

By themselves, however, the latest sanctions will have little impact on the North, since it is already heavily under sanctions. The new measures may be meant for public consumption while the US works behind the scenes to carry out more aggressive actions—such as the recent shutting down of the Internet in North Korea.

The movie itself was a provocation, depicting the killing of a sitting head of state and created with the involvement of the US intelligence establishment. Numerous US media outlets, including the *New York Times*, have uncritically accepted Washington's claims that the North was behind the hacking.

The sanctions are only the beginning of the Obama administration's foreshadowed "response." They serve to further isolate the Stalinist regime as the US continues to ramp up pressure against Pyongyang and ultimately Beijing, as part of Washington's "pivot to Asia," for the purpose of militarily and economically encircling China.

Treasury Secretary Jack Lew stated: "We will continue to use this broad and powerful tool to expose the activities of North Korean government officials and entities." White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest referred to the sanctions as simply the "first aspect" of the US response.

Already, the US is likely responsible for the Internet outage that twice struck North Korea over the past fortnight. The White House has not confirmed or denied involvement in the outage. One US official quoted by CNN claimed that there were many possible explanations, including "that they had ended up doing it to themselves."

The United States has not released any evidence that Pyongyang was behind the hacking of Sony despite claiming that the FBI possesses information revealing North Korea's involvement. A number of US analysts have questioned the FBI's claims. Cyber security firm Norse last week provided material to the FBI indicating that disgruntled former employees may have been involved. North Korea offered to conduct a joint investigation, but the US simply dismissed the proposal.

In response to the Norse revelation, the Obama administration stated that the FBI's intelligence is

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unavailable to companies like Norse. That raises the obvious question as to why whatever evidence the FBI supposedly holds has not been released. If such evidence actually existed, it would have been made available to strengthen Washington's case.

China also responded critically to Washington's claims, although in less bombastic terms, calling for restraint. "Relevant parties should act with caution, avoid taking actions that might further escalate tensions and jointly safeguard the peace and stability of the Korean Peninsula," China's Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said.

Restraint is the furthest thing from the minds of the Washington elite. Democrat Senator Robert Menendez, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, stated: "We need to look at putting North Korea back on the list of state sponsors of terrorism, which would have far more pervasive consequences." Menendez accused North Korea of landing "a virtual bomb on Sony's parking lot." Such rhetoric is designed to further inflame tensions.

The South Korean government has lined up behind the US. Its Yonhap News Agency has presented Washington's claims as fact. After Friday's sanctions were announced, the South's foreign ministry released a statement saying: "The US government's sanctions are seen as an appropriate countermeasure against North Korea's policy and actions such as its persistent provocation, including the latest Sony Pictures hacking attack."

Washington's offensive against North Korea is cutting across tentative steps by Pyongyang toward better relations with Seoul. In his New Years Day address, Kim Jong-un suggested that a summit could be possible with South Korean President Park Geun-hye "if Seoul truly seeks to improve relations through dialogue" and "the atmosphere and environment are ready."

A number of commentaries appeared in the North Korean media following Kim Jong-un's speech, suggesting some sort of shift in relations. Pyongyang Broadcasting Station said that the leader's message provided "clear directions and methods" for reunification of the country, while calling for a stop to the "dangers of war," such as military drills by South Korea and the US.

South Korean President Park responded cautiously however. She suggested that the North attend high-level talks recently proposed by Seoul for this month to discuss a reunion of families displaced by the 1950-53 Korean War and other issues of "mutual concern." Last year, Kim made a similar suggestion of talks in his New Year speech but was met with aloofness from Seoul, which has worked closely with Washington.

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