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SCOPE: U.S., N. Korea playing dangerous nuclear arms game

By Mikio Haruna

TOKYO, Nov. 12, Kyodo - The United States and North Korea, locked in mutual distrust, are playing a dangerous behind-the-scenes nuclear weapons game, recently obtained declassified U.S. documents show.

To prepare for the worst on the Korean Peninsula following an emergency, the U.S. military carried out mock bombing training with nuclear weapons in 1998, according to a declassified U.S. document.

The document was obtained by Hans M. Kristensen, a consultant to the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), a U.S. antinuclear and environmental conservation group, through the Freedom of Information Act.

A document dated Dec. 9, 1998 on the Fourth Fighter Wing says the wing mobilized 24 F-15E fighter-bombers for training to load and drop mock bombs from January to June the same year.

It said the aircraft took off from the Seymour Johnson Air Force Base in North Carolina and dropped BDU-38 mock bombs on the Avon Park Air Force Bombing Range in Florida, about 900 kilometers away from the air base.

There were three kinds of drills -- Operational Readiness Exercise (ORE), Nuclear Surety Exercise (NSE), and Nuclear Employment Exercise (NEM).

No details were revealed, but drills in "nine areas of the nuclear program" were carried out.

The drills and initial evaluations were said to be "unsatisfactory," but the final evaluation was called "excellent."

Assuming a long-distance nuclear-bombing mission from the U.S. mainland to North Korea, E-3A planes equipped with the airborne warning and control system (AWACS) and KC-135 airborne refueling planes also took part in the drills.

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Kristensen said the Fourth Fighter Wing carries out similar strategic nuclear drills every year, and in attacks against North Korea in an emergency, Trident submarines armed with submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM), long-distance bombers, and Tomahawk cruise missiles will be used.

The United States deployed nuclear weapons in South Korea for 33 years from 1958. A document on the U.S. Eighth Tactical Fighter Wing obtained by Kristensen and dated Oct. 22, 1991 said nuclear arms drills were conducted at U.S. bases in South Korea.

The document said U.S. Air Force pilots belonging to the Kunsan base in South Korea carried out air-to-ground nuclear attack training in three fields -- "weapons delivery, nuclear strike and surface attack tactics," and received evaluations.

At that time, 48 F-16C, F-16D planes and B-61 nuclear bombs were deployed at the base.

A March, 1978 document on private research commissioned by the Pentagon's Defense Nuclear Agency and obtained by another private think tank, the Nautilus Institute, depicted a scenario of using an estimated at best 30 airborne nuclear weapons if North Korea invaded South Korea.

In 1991, President George Bush, father of the current president, declared a removal of all tactical nuclear arms from U.S. bases overseas, and the U.S. military transported all nuclear weapons out of South Korea at the end of the year.

But the documents confirm the U.S. maintenance of a nuclear deterrent on the Korean Peninsula since then.

Under a revised nuclear setup, the administration of President George W. Bush is trying to develop nuclear bombs with ability to pierce North Korea's underground nuclear facilities, and military analysts said the U.S. nuclear strategy against North Korea is diversifying.



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