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S. Koreans Shrug Off Nuclear Threat;
Many believe the U.S. poses a bigger danger than the communist North. The young tend to view the crisis as a White House creation.

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DATELINE: SEOUL

BODY:

When Lee Jin Ju pauses to think about the nuclear crisis brewing over the Korean peninsula, she knows exactly whom she fears.

"George Bush," replies the 22-year-old accounting student without missing a beat. "He's a war maniac."

Lee doesn't like North Korea's Kim Jong Il much, either. "But we're not afraid of him. He's a Korean like us. Even if he does get the bomb, he's not going to use it against us." This is a sentiment echoed by many Koreans -- even some conservatives -- and it is complicating U.S. efforts to forge a consensus on North Korea among its allies. There is a tendency, particularly among the young, to shrug off the current situation as the creation of a hysterical White House. Many South Koreans see their estranged brethren to the north more as objects of pity than of fear, and the Americans less as saviors who defended them against communism than as potential troublemakers.

The news that North Korea was removing surveillance cameras from its nuclear facilities got smaller headlines in Monday's newspapers in South Korea than in the United States. Several major papers here played the story below the news of a political party reshuffle. The stock market actually went up in mid-October when it was revealed that North Korea was violating its international agreements on its nuclear program. Only in the last two days have the markets here shown any jitters, and those were mostly attributed to Iraq.

In one more step, the South Korean news agency Yonhap reported today that the North Koreans were moving fresh fuel rods into a small, 5-megawatt reactor at its Yongbyon nuclear facility, which had been closed under a 1994 agreement with the United States. The agency also said workers were moving freely in and out of the facility, apparently in preparation to restart it.

Despite North Korea's actions since October to restart its nuclear program, there is no sense of impending crisis in Seoul.

The streets of the South Korean capital throb with neon advertising, the jangle of ringing cell phones, Christmas carols and throngs of people bent on spending money. Stop almost anyone to ask about the North Korean nuclear program, and the response will be a quizzical

stare.

"We don't seriously fear there will be a war, and if there will be, the Americans will start it," said Hyun Ho Sang, a 19-year-old college freshman.

Han Sung Joo, a former South Korean foreign minister, says the South Korean government has deliberately kept people ignorant about the danger posed by the North Koreans.

"We have a government that is interested in playing down the threat," Han said. "There is not much interest in explaining how serious it is that North Korea is developing nuclear weapons, and as a result there is a certain insensitivity among the public."

Kim Kyong Won, a former ambassador to the United States and a leading intellectual in the South Korean establishment, says South Koreans do not believe that the North's development of nuclear weapons has anything to do with them.

"The Koreans think there is no need to worry about North Korea developing nuclear weapons," Kim said. "They figure that Kim Jong Il loves life too much to start a war that he will surely lose.... But Bush, on the other hand, is an ascetic and a warrior."

The reaction may be baffling to outsiders with an image of Korea frozen from the 1950-53 war, when more than 1 million people were killed. The perception is that U.S. intervention paved the way for South Korea's current prosperity, sparing its people from the hunger and cold that now grip the North.

But the official version of history is challenged by many South Koreans, who increasingly question the U.S. role, past and present, in keeping the peace.

The victory in last week's presidential election of left-of-center labor lawyer Roh Moo Hyun has emboldened those who favor more independence from the United States in foreign policy and has given rise to a mood of giddy nationalism.

Many South Koreans say they do not believe President Bush's repeated assertions that the United States does not intend to attack North Korea. They were rattled by Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld's comments this week suggesting that the United States could wage simultaneous military campaigns against Iraq and North Korea.

"It's all a little confusing. We don't know what to believe. Bush does not make clear his intentions," said Ha Ji Yun, a 26-year-old civil servant who works with South Korea's conservative opposition party. "That's why we are more afraid of the Americans than the North Koreans."

Although attitudes toward the United States have hardened, feelings about North Korea are ambivalent. South Koreans tend to view North Koreans less as enemies than as bothersome relatives. And as with family members, the South Koreans feel free to complain about them but bristle when the criticism comes from outsiders -- hence the anger expressed here when Bush characterized North Korea as part of an "axis of evil."

Outgoing President Kim Dae Jung's "sunshine policy" has brought a stream of cultural, sporting and economic exchanges. For the first time this year, the South Korean Defense Ministry decided not to designate North Korea as its "main enemy" in an annual white paper on security issues. It chose not to publish the report at all.

The South Korean government last year gave the North \$70.5 million in humanitarian aid, while private parties donated an additional \$65 million, according to the Unification Ministry.

Some South Koreans say they are pleased that their fellow Koreans are developing nuclear weapons.

"I think it is good that North Korea has the bomb. One day we will be united and that bomb will be ours. All these other countries have it -- India, Pakistan -- so why not Korea?" said Won Hye Jun, a 22-year-old pianist.

Increasingly, South Koreans say they are not as fearful of North Korea as they are of Korea's traditional conquerors, China and Japan.

Asked about the bomb, many South Koreans cite a novel called "The Rose of Sharon Blooms Again." The book is still a huge seller nearly a decade after its publication during a crisis resolved by the 1994 agreement, under which North Korea froze its nuclear program in exchange for international assistance for its energy industry.

The plot revolves around a South Korean scientist who secretly helps the North Koreans develop a nuclear bomb that is used to fend off Japanese aggression.

Conventional weapons currently pose far more of an immediate threat to South Korea than nuclear weapons. The fear here is that if the United States were to use a surgical strike to try to disable North Korea's Yongbyon nuclear facility, the North might retaliate by shelling Seoul with conventional weapons. During the height of the previous crisis, North Korea threatened to turn Seoul into a "sea of fire."

Michael Breen, the Seoul-based author of "The Koreans," says South Koreans shrugged off the threat as more of the bluster for which the North Koreans are famous.

"But the Americans took it literally," Breen recalled. "People were getting telephone calls from their relatives abroad and only then did they start to worry.... It finally got to the point where Koreans were a bit nervous, but even at that their fear was mostly that the Americans would miscalculate."

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