

Household goods among banned Korea items

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Is the aluminum being used for missile tubes or bicycles? Will the chemical go into rocket fuel or pesticide?

These are the types of questions countries might be asking as they try to obey a new U.N. resolution that orders them to crack down on companies supplying North Korea's ballistic missile and nuclear programs.

Some analysts say enforcing the resolution passed Saturday will be tough because many materials used to make weapons also are found in everyday household goods. And the North Korean companies dealing the goods are often shadowy front companies that are hard to track because of their murky ownership and constantly changing names.

Paik Hak-soon, North Korea expert at Sejong Institute, a think tank outside Seoul, said the U.N. resolution that aims to punish the North for an alleged nuclear test was mainly political.

"You will have huge problems in terms of how to interpret enforcement and under what categories the items should be included," Paik said. "There will be serious problems in selecting what items to pursue and to what extent."

The U.S.-initiated resolution, passed unanimously by the U.N. Security Council, tells countries to freeze the funds or assets of people or companies that are providing support to the reclusive North's programs for making ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons.

North Korea's U.N. Ambassador Pak Gil Yon walked out after the resolution was passed, accusing the Security Council of "gangster-like" action.

Last year, the U.S. Department of Treasury named eight North Korean companies whose assets should be frozen because they allegedly were dealing in weapons of mass destruction. The businesses included the Pyongyang-based firms Hesong Trading Corp., Tosong Technology Trading Corp. and Korea Complex Equipment Import Corp.

Americans were forbidden from doing business with the eight companies, and U.S. officials said bank accounts or financial assets belonging to them would be frozen in U.S. banks.

Last year, Washington claimed that Banco Delta Asia SARL — a bank in the Chinese territory of Macau — was being used by North Korea for money-laundering. The U.S. banned transactions between the bank and American financial institutions.

The new U.N. resolution does not apply to assets involving foodstuffs, medicine and fees for rent, taxes, insurance and other similar services.

Trying to figure out why the North Koreans are buying certain goods will be difficult, said Bertil Lintner, author of the book "Great Leader, Dear Leader: Demystifying North Korea Under the Kim Clan."

The North Koreans are masters at buying dual-purpose goods for their weapons programs, said Lintner, who has tracked the North's network of companies in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Thailand.

"Almost any kind of goods for the military can be used for civilian purposes," he said.

Certain types of pesticide can be used for rocket fuel or to seal swimming pools, he said. Aluminum casing can be used for missile tubes or for bicycles, he said.

"They don't get everything in the same place. They buy it from different places," Lintner said. "It's only when you put it all together that you can get a complete picture of what they're using it for."

Some of the most active North Korean businessmen work out of Pyongyang's embassies, Lintner said. The embassies get little funding from the government and must fend for themselves financially. They're also under

pressure to send money home to the cash-strapped communist leadership.

Lintner said that the North's diplomats in the Thai capital of Bangkok make money buying second-hand mobile phones. The old phones are sent in a diplomatic pouch to the North's embassy in Bangladesh, where they are resold on the streets.

"They have to engage in all kinds of strange business," he said.

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