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North Korea Blasts US, Vows to Defend Its Sovereignty

Associated Press
March 13, 2006

SEOUL (AP)--North Korea lashed out at criticism over its human rights record by the United States, denying it commits abuses and vowing to take steps to defend its sovereignty.

"Human rights are guaranteed the highest level in our country," the North Korean Foreign Ministry said in a statement carried late Monday by the official Korean Central News Agency. "The more we will strengthen all measures in every way to safeguard our sovereignty ... the more the U.S. and hostile forces stick to their human rights offensive."

The North's accusation came days after the U.S. State Department released its annual human rights report that said North Korea's human rights record was extremely poor last year, with the country's "dictatorship" subjecting its citizens to "rigid controls over many aspects of their lives."

The North's ministry said the U.S. offensive on human rights amounted to intervention in the country's internal affairs, motivated by the Bush administration's alleged aims to isolate and stifle the communist regime.

Pyongyang also accused the United States of abuses, citing its alleged human rights violations at detention facilities in Iraq, Afghanistan and Guantanamo Bay.

U.S. President George W. Bush has appointed a special envoy on North Korea's human rights, and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said last month that he will this year become more active in that role.