

# Dialogue is only way to change N. Korea: Gregg

2014/03/12 00:39

WASHINGTON, March 12 (Yonhap) -- North Korean officials believe time is on their side when it comes to stand-offs with the Obama administration in its final years, a former U.S. ambassador to Seoul said.

Donald Gregg stressed negotiations are the only way to denuclearize the communist nation.

"I think the North Korean regime is quite stable and if we want them to give up nuclear weapons at some point we have to have dialogue with them," he said in an interview with Yonhap News Agency earlier this week.

Gregg, who served as the top U.S. envoy in Korea from 1989 to 1993, traveled to Pyongyang last month, his sixth trip to the reclusive nation.

He met with some North Korean officials, including Vice Foreign Minister Ri Yong-ho, Pyongyang's point man on the now-stalled six-way nuclear talks.

Gregg quoted Ri as saying that if Obama does not want dialogue, Pyongyang would wait until his successor takes office.

Ri also made it clear that Pyongyang is going to improve its relations with Seoul and does not want Washington to interfere with that, according to Gregg.

Gregg said he saw no indications of Washington and Pyongyang resuming formal talks anytime soon.

He added it's important to continue informal talks to help build mutual trust and respect.

"They (North Koreans) have created a new USA institute of their foreign ministry and we are thinking about ways that we can perhaps invite some people to meetings outside of Pyongyang to discuss ways in which relations can improve," he said.

He is currently chairman of the Pacific Century Institute, a nonprofit organization headquartered in the Los Angeles area.

Gregg said he briefed the State Department on his latest visit to Pyongyang.

Meanwhile, he lashed out at calls by some conservatives in South Korea for Seoul to go nuclear.

"If South Korea builds nuclear weapons, I think it will be almost impossible to get them out of the North," he said.

He recalled the U.S. withdrawal of tactical nuclear weapons from Korea in the early 1990s.

"One year after I arrived (in Seoul to take up the ambassadorial post), I was able to recommend to Washington that our tactical nuclear weapons be removed from South Korea," Gregg said.

The removal of those weapons from the peninsula "paved the way for the most productive period of negotiations between North and South Korea that had ever taken place," he added.

Gregg said he plans to publish a memoir about his experience on Korea, titled, "Fragments of a Life Lived in the CIA, the White House, and the Two Koreas."

He worked at the Central Intelligence Agency for three decades and then served as security adviser at the White House.

lcd@yna.co.kr

leechidong@gmail.com