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19:04 4 July 2015

Kazakhstan dismissed Gaddafi's "Muslim nuclear bomb" proposal in 1992

By Masakatsu Ota

ASTANA, July 4, Kyodo

In the spring of 1992, just a few months after the collapse of the Soviet Union, then Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi proposed that Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev share with Libya nuclear warheads abandoned by the Soviets as "the first Muslim nuclear bomb."

But the proposal was dead on arrival because of Kazakhstan's antipathy toward nuclear weapons based on the hardships it experienced as a nuclear testing ground during the Soviet era. Kassym-Jormat Tokayev, chairman of the Senate of Kazakhstan, revealed the little-known nuclear episode involving the late Libyan leader in a recent interview with Kyodo News.

Kazakhstan is one of the leading nations promoting nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation agenda as it will co-chair with Japan a coming international conference to promote the early entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty in September this year in New York.

On Aug. 29, 1991, Nazarbayev made the historic announcement that he was shutting down the Semipalatinsk Nuclear Test Site where the Soviet Union had conducted 456 nuclear tests. According to Kazakhstan officials, 1.5 million people have been affected by the tests.

The episode detailed by Tokayev, former prime minister and foreign minister, exposed Kaddafi's strong ambition to pursue nuclear weapons as a countermeasure against Israel, which he regarded as Libya's No.1 enemy.

"I clearly remember this case because, in the spring of 1992 when I was deputy foreign minister, we got a letter through the Libyan embassy in Moscow. At that time we had no Libyan embassy here in Kazakhstan," Tokayev recalled.

"We received the letter signed by Muammar Gaddafi, who said, 'My dear brother, Nursultan, we got a rare chance to become the possessor of the first Muslim nuclear bomb.' And then he elaborated on how they could make this idea to be implemented, and he said about financial support," Tokayev continued.

According to Tokayev, who is a specialist in nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation issues, Kazakhstan had already made "a principal decision" to join the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear

Weapons before Nazarbayev received the letter from Gaddafi, so the government didn't give serious consideration to the proposal.

"We sent this letter from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the presidential administration and, of course, this letter was not taken quite seriously, because the principal decision had already been made," Tokayev said. "I remember that we just sent this letter to the president with the advice to leave it without an answer."

"We clearly understood that it was not an appropriate proposal, because it was a fantasy and it was very much an irresponsible suggestion," Tokayev added.

By 1995, Kazakhstan returned more than 1,400 nuclear warheads and 40 heavy bombers to Russia. It destroyed silos of inter-continental ballistic missiles across the nation. In 1994, it shipped several hundred kilograms of weapons-grade highly enriched uranium to the United States in order to prevent these nuclear materials from falling into the wrong hands.

Kazakhstan also signed and ratified the Treaty on a Nuclear Free Zone in Central Asia, the so-called Semipalatinsk Treaty, with four neighboring countries. Such energetic efforts on nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation are given a high evaluation by U.S. President Barack Obama, who pledged to seek "the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons" in 2009.

"My president is a regular participant in the Nuclear Security Summit. The first one was in Washington (in 2010), and President Obama made a special point of highlighting Kazakhstan's contribution and, in his opening remarks, he has recognized Kazakhstan as a role model for any country to follow," Ertan Idrissov, current foreign minister of Kazakhstan, said in a recent interview with Kyodo News.

The Nuclear Security Summit is one of Obama's key security projects that seek to strengthen security and custody of nuclear materials.

"For us, it was about a vision of the future, because we have seen the future of Kazakhstan as a peaceful country, as a civilized partner, with strong obligations to the international community and we were very much concerned about being considered as a reliable and responsible partner," Tokayev said by way of explaining why Kazakhstan abandoned all nuclear warheads left behind by the Soviet Union.

Idrissov also emphasized that a nuclear weapon is "absolute evil."

"We have the moral right and moral zeal to come out very strongly against nuclear weapons and nuclear tests... Kazakhstan was thinking strategically into the future. Our president had a very clear vision that Kazakhstan would be less secure if it continues to have nuclear weapons, because having nuclear weapons would mean that we would be the target of other countries that possess nuclear weapons," Idrissov said.

Before 2003, when Gaddafi announced abandonment of all programs for developing weapons of mass destruction including nuclear weapons after coming under heavy pressure from the United States and Britain, he had tried to acquire nuclear weapons and related technology through a variety of means.

According to U.S. nuclear specialists, Libya attempted early in the 1970s to purchase nuclear weapons from China, but in vain. In 1980, Gaddafi tried to acquire uranium enrichment technology on the international market.

Facing severe international sanctions imposed after Libyan agents were involved in terrorist activities,

however, he ended up dealing with A.Q. Khan, a Pakistan nuclear scientist, and bought centrifuges and related parts on a "nuclear black market" established by Khan.

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17:00 24 July 2015

ICBM incident in Wyoming highlights nuclear risk posed by cyber threat

By Masakatsu Ota

WASHINGTON, July 24, Kyodo

On Oct. 23, 2010, missile launch crews at the Warren Air Force Base in Wyoming lost contact with 50 intercontinental ballistic missiles.

"I was in the Defense Department at the time. And we were notified that there was a period of time when we lost connectivity with the status report updating of Minuteman-3 (ICBM) missiles. It was because of a computer failure," John Harvey, former deputy assistant secretary of defense, said during a recent interview with Kyodo News.

After 45 minutes, contact was restored, and while nothing extraordinary seemed to have taken place, President Barak Obama was annoyed.

"Later on, we found out that President Obama was concerned he had not been notified sooner about the event, and, in fact, the president asked to be briefed on those reports. His concern was, obviously, that we not allow these things to happen again," Harvey said.

Though it was later found out that the communication outage was caused by the improper installation of a circuit board in the computer system of the launch center, Obama had a reason to worry.

"When the ICBMs believe that they have been cut off from human launch control centers, they very quickly conclude that the launch control centers have been destroyed by an enemy's nuclear attack and that they need to switch to another source for their launch signals. In this case, the launch signals would come from a commanding aircraft after they activate a radio antenna," Bruce Blair, a former Minuteman launch control officer, explained in a recent interview.

During the switch to airborne control, "the opportunity exists for hackers to transmit signals directly to the missile receivers," Blair, a nuclear expert and member of the secretary of state's advisory body, said.

Actual missile launch presupposes three types of encrypted codes -- targeting, unlocking and launch. All of these codes are so highly classified, however, that it is extremely difficult for outside hackers to obtain them.

Such an accidental launch scenario caused by cyber hackers is "implausible," Harvey emphasized.

However, Blair warns of a potential cyber risk that could undermine the security of nuclear weapon command and control systems.

"There are questions about insiders and insider support. Think of an Edward Snowden. What if there are two people colluding to provide access to the communications networks, possibly to provide actual codes," Blair said.

Snowden is a former Central Intelligence Agency employee who leaked details of the U.S. National Security Agency's information gathering through personal email and phone records.

Also, just last year, some nuclear missile launch officers in Montana were involved in a cheating ring during job-performance exams, raising public concern about the internal moral and discipline of nuclear units.

According to Blair, the launching codes are under the control of senior military officers, even though the president must authorize pushing the "nuclear button." So, if one or a few of these officials become "rogue," it may be possible for outside hackers to initiate a missile launch by colluding with an inside rogue officer.

"Is the command and control system resilient to sabotage? I worry about, sabotage as well as cyber vulnerabilities," Harvey said.

At the initial stage of the Wyoming incident in 2010, the possibility of a cyber attack was considered by military officials, who suspected that a hacker may have got into the missile network and cut off communication.

"Internally, they were panicked. Panicked by the possibility that this was a cyber attack, and they did an urgent investigation, on the assumption that it was possible that this was caused by a cyber attack," Blair pointed out. Obama took this incident seriously and ordered a thorough investigation on system vulnerability and possible access points for outsiders.

Currently the United States deploys 450 Minuteman missiles each carrying a nuclear warhead 20 times more powerful than a Hiroshima-type of atomic bomb. These missiles are under the so-called "launch on warning" status.

"The bottom line is the burden of proof should fall on those who assert that this is not a problem and continue to maintain nuclear weapons on launch on warning status," Blair said of the reality that the United States and Russia together deploy around 1,800 warheads under the launch on warning status.

A recent report published by "Global Zero," a nuclear-elimination advocacy organization co-founded by Blair, also emphasizes the nuclear risks posed by cyber threats. The report mentioned "a host of emerging 21st century dangers that are raising the global risks of nuclear weapons use - such as increasing 'operationalization' and usability of the nuclear forces in several regions of the world, particularly in Asia."

According to the report and Blair, there are indications that Asian nuclear powers like India and China are developing plans and capabilities for deploying nuclear weapons in ways that greatly shorten the amount of time needed, following the example of the United States and Russia.

"For example, the Indian prime minister has been equipped with a 'nuclear suitcase' tied to dedicated

special satellite communications in order to expedite launch authorization and increase the speed of nuclear use. China also is considering taking this step," Blair said.

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