

**WRAPUP 1-INTERVIEW-S.Korea's Roh says North threat is bluster.**By **Chaitanya Kalbag** and Martin Nesirky

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SEOUL, Oct 17 (Reuters) - South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun dismissed North Korea's threat to prove it has a nuclear deterrent as pre-talks bluster on Friday and said Pyongyang was really after regime survival and aid rather than atomic weapons.

In an interview at the presidential Blue House ahead of next week's APEC summit of Pacific Rim leaders, Roh said any turmoil arising from his own proposed confidence-vote referendum on his rule would be short because the country's democracy was sound.

Roh said the economy - Asia's fourth largest - was also solid.

He said it had had a rough ride in 2003 but had bottomed out and would exceed 4.8 percent growth next year, in part thanks to hi-tech innovations in one of the world's most technologically advanced countries and despite the political confusion.

"The confusion caused by this referendum will be over pretty quickly," Roh said in his first interview since the referendum announcement this week. "When we look at South Korean history, political conflict and economic performance went on separate tracks."

He said he saw no constitutional hurdles to his proposed referendum, but he would have to work to forge a political consensus with the opposition parties which control parliament and could block his proposed confidence vote.

On North Korea, Roh said Pyongyang understood the atomic route was a dangerous dead-end despite its provocative tone.

North Korea threatened on Thursday to display a nuclear deterrent at "an appropriate time". U.S. officials said they saw nothing new in the latest rhetoric from Pyongyang.

"I think North Korea is blustering to earn a more favourable position in the negotiations," Roh said, adding the North would not want to have nuclear weapons if it got security guarantees.

HAUNTING TIME

"I do not think North Korea actually wants to possess nuclear weapons, but rather it wants to secure guarantees for its regime and it wants to earn economic assistance from outside," he said.

Roh spoke in the Hundred Mountains Room in the Blue House - named for its ornate tiled roof. It is one of several traditional-style Korean buildings in the presidential compound, which has a spectacular mountain backdrop in the heart of Seoul.

The president - who was accompanied by his national security, economic and foreign policy advisers - said it would take time to reach a decision on whether to agree to a U.S. request to send combat troops to Iraq because he needed to sound out public opinion thoroughly.

He said his weak political standing - his ratings are in the 30-percent range - meant he could not force his view on people.



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Asked whether Roh could say "no" to U.S. President George W. Bush given the South's military alliance with the United States, he replied:

"Your question forces me to give you a very clear-cut answer on the issue that has been haunting me for days and days. So I don't think I can give a clear-cut answer to that."

Roh flies to Bangkok on Sunday and will return next Friday after visiting Singapore to discuss a Free Trade Agreement with the island state, which plays an economic hub role in Southeast Asia that South Korea wants to emulate in North Asia.

He said the fundamentals of the South Korean economy - which slipped into its first recession in five years in the first half - were still strong and very sound.

"The economy has already passed its lowest point and we expect it will gradually pick up from the end of the year or the beginning of next year," Roh said. The economy grew 6.3 percent last year and is forecast to grow about three percent in 2003.

This year the economy has faltered, hit by a sluggish global economy, the North Korea crisis and cuts in household lending by banks, which have hit consumer spending and corporate investment.

Roh said the political turmoil sparked by his call for a referendum would not damage the economy. He said his drastic move was necessary to cure corruption in South Korean politics and that the society was sound enough to endure the treatment.

"When you first catch a cold, you have a cough...you also cough at the end of your sickness," he said, referring to the political confusion surrounding his referendum call.

"Consider this the cough that comes at the end of a cold or flu." (Additional reporting by Lee Suwan, Paul Eckert and Yoo Choonsik).

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