Koreas battle in cyber war
Correspondents in Seoul
MAY 28, 2004

SOUTH KOREA'S top military intelligence chief says North Korea is operating an elite military unit specialising in hacking into South Korean computer networks. Song Young-Keun, commanding general of the counter-intelligence Defence Security Command (DSC), told a conference that North Korea was building up its "cyber-terror" capability on orders from its leader, Kim Jong-Il.

"Following orders from Chairman Kim Jong-Il, North Korea has been operating a crack unit specialising in computer hacking and strengthening its cyber-terror ability," he said. The conference was organised by the Korea Information Security Agency affiliated with the information and communications ministry to discuss the protection of security related intelligence.

Mr Song said the North Korean military hackers were breaking into the computer networks of South Korean government agencies and research institutes to steal classified information.

His comments came a day after military generals from North Korea and South Korea met to reduce tensions on the world's last Cold War frontier.

North Korea's military "hacking unit" is part of the communist state's decade-old drive to boost its electronics warfare capability, according to military analysts in Seoul.

"Much of it is still remains unknown, though Pyongyang began preparing for electronic warfare as early as the first nuclear crisis in 1994," said Nam Joo-Hong, a military strategist at Kyonggi University in Seoul.

North Korea was then locked in a stand-off over its plutonium-based nuclear programs with the United States.

The previous nuclear crisis ended with a US-North Korean compromise that produced an agreement to freeze the north nuclear facilities in 1994. That agreement unravelled in 2002 with Washington accusing Pyongyang of embarking on a new nuclear program based on enriched uranium.

Yonhap news agency quoted South Korean officials as saying that top graduates from Kim Il-Sung Military Academy, a military intelligence college, are handpicked and given intensive training in computer-related skills before being assigned to the hackers' unit.

Their tasks are to get into the computer networks run by South Korean government agencies and research institutes and to attack computer systems when necessary, according to Defence Security Command officers.

Mr Song said there were eight internet websites directly run by Pyongyang and 26 other sites operated by pro-Pyongyang organisations which are acting as propaganda outlets for the communist state.

"Combined efforts are necessary to cope with the mounting cyber attacks from North Korea as it is impossible for the DSC alone to cope with them," the general said.
Lee Hong-Sub, head of the Korea Information Security Agency, also said at the same conference that fighting "cyber threats without borders" requires joint efforts by the government and the private sector.

Defectors from North Korea said computer technology is a top priority in North Korea, with Kim Jong-Nam, the eldest son of the country's ruler, leading the campaign to arm its military with state of the art information technology.

Some 100 hackers graduate from the military academy every year, they said.

*Agence France-Presse*

**This report appears on australianIT.com.au.**