SOPHIE RAWORTH:
Now President Obama has made it clear that America will not tolerate any nuclear element to the threat from North Korea. His Secretary of State, John Kerry, has been touring Asia this weekend, strengthening alliances, engaging the mood among Japanese and Chinese leaders. Before he travelled to the region John Kerry was in London and he held high level talks with America’s Acting Ambassador to the UK, Barbara Stephenson, who joins me now. Good morning.

BARBARA STEPHENSON:
Good morning.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
Is China very much the key to diffusing the tension, do you think?
BARBARA STEPHENSON:
China’s an important part of it. China has actually, yes, an important part to play in terms of North Korea’s dependence on China, so it’s an important stop that Secretary Kerry is making today.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
It’s a very unnerving time though, isn’t it, because nobody quite knows what’s going to happen next? Tomorrow is a key day for many, a lot of people expecting there could be some sort of missile launch because it is of course the birth of North Korea’s founder tomorrow that’s being marked.

BARBARA STEPHENSON:
And we’re monitoring this closely, as you would expect us to. But I want to be clear that we’ve made no change at all in the threat warning to American citizens in the Republic of Korea and we’ve not encouraged, discouraged Americans from visiting South Korea or indeed told them to take any safety precautions. So we’re really interested in seeing this very provocative rhetoric be ratcheted down, so we’re monitoring it closely but we are not urging Americans to take any special precautions at all.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
But it’s difficult to know quite how to handle it all given that the Defence Intelligence Agency has just admitted that they for the first think that North Korea does actually have a nuclear weapon small enough to be attached to a missile.

BARBARA STEPHENSON:
And I did see those reports and our Director of National Intelligence, Clapper, spoke about it to a house committee at the end of the week. It’s not a consensus view among the American intelligence community. That’s just one view. So yes there is concern, but again we don’t have specific information to indicate cause for real alarm that would cause us to ask American citizens to change their behaviour.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
But the problem with North Korea is nobody really knows what’s going on inside
there and is this fake belligerence, is this some sort of, I don’t know, diplomatic blackmail, or are these threats real? Would this young leader actually go ahead with any of this?

BARBARA STEPHENSON:
Well again there’s an internal audience for this, there’s an external audience for this. It is alarming, the rhetoric is very provocative. But we’ve seen a fair bit of this rhetoric, so we are interested in having this ratchet down.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
And do you think … I mean John Kerry is saying that dialogue, talking is the way forward. Is that the way to diffuse this?

BARBARA STEPHENSON:
Well we are prepared to have dialogue if it’s leading toward an eventual agreement on the part of the North Koreans to give up nuclear ambitions. So we remain open to dialogue but there are certain conditions for it.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
Let’s talk about gun control because it has been a very big political issue in America, particularly since the Sandy Hook shootings in December. And just yesterday President Obama took a very unusual step, didn’t he, and allowed the mother of a very young child who died in those shootings to take over his weekly radio address? An incredibly moving moment.

BARBARA STEPHENSON:
I think the Sandy Hook massacre affected Americans in such a profound way. I happened to be home in the run-up to Christmas right after the massacre happened and I was moved to tears kind of repeatedly by seeing the signs of how much this affected people. I think the President has captured that really well - to say this is our moment, all of us, to try to do something to keep this from happening again. So next week will be a really big week on this front. The Senate has agreed to go ahead with debate, so there will be discussion of limiting assault weapons, limiting the number of rounds that can go into a magazine. They will be looking at cross-partisan support for
better mental health treatment and early identification for background checks. So it is a really big week on an issue that divides Americans, but you know Sandy Hook broke our hearts.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
But debate is one thing. New laws, which is what the mother of this young child was calling for, is a completely different thing, and there is an enormous amount of resistance, isn’t there, in America?

BARBARA STEPHENSON:
There is. This is not an easy issue. The Second Amendment guarantees the right to bear arms, and it’s deeply felt and it is one of those red/blue issues that does divide the country. But the President I think has really tried to capture this sense of grief that united us after Sandy Hook to say surely we can do better, we can’t go through this again.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
And it’s not just the President. His wife was doing the same last week as well and really trying to you know tap into that.

BARBARA STEPHENSON:
And Harry Reid as well in the Senate kind of said let’s let this debate go forward. So you can see that gun violence has touched American lives and you know it’s the moment now to try to take this very difficult issue forward.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
Here in Britain a big obviously political event or a significant event on Wednesday, Lady Thatcher’s funeral. Past presidents have all been invited. Who is actually going to be coming?

BARBARA STEPHENSON:
You know we’re still waiting for the White House to put the finishing touches on the guest list. As I mentioned, we’ve got a really big week in Washington, so we’re waiting for that to come out; should be coming out any minute now. But I think one
of the things that so struck me on Monday after hearing the news that we’d lost Lady Thatcher was the tributes that just poured in from America - from the White House, from the State Department; a unanimous resolution passed by the House of Representatives. And it was a reminder to me again ... I’d had one of those conversations that one has in the afternoon with a senior British official about whether the relationship was really special or Britain was only just one of several allies with whom we consult closely on the major issues. And as I watched the response in America to losing her, I realised she’s not just a towering figure in British history; she’s part of our history too; and you know the idea of “Don’t go wobbly on me now” and “The lady’s not for turning”, they’re as much a part of our lexicon as they are of yours.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
But given how big a figure you say she is in America, presumably can we expect big names to come here?

BARBARA STEPHENSON:
I think we can expect an awful lot of interest in this funeral, I can tell you that. We’ve been wrestling with it ever since the word got out - trying to manage the guest list with No. 10.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
There’s a lot of talk and a lot of commentary about Margaret Thatcher’s relationship with Ronald Reagan and the “special relationship”. Do you think that that was it, the high water? Will we ever see a kind of relationship like that, transatlantic, in the future?

BARBARA STEPHENSON:
You know I just don’t buy that the best days of the special relationship are behind us. I’ve worked this relationship for twenty years - sometimes very intensely - and what I see … I just spent last week with Secretary Kerry and so much of my leadership here in intense conversations with Foreign Secretary Hague and all the way down. Our officials don’t ever stop the conversation - on Syria, on Middle East peace, on what to do about North Korea - and I see you know two presidents of the same generation
who get along well, speak together easily. I think the world needs our leadership now and I don’t buy it.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
Barbara Stephenson, thank you very much for joining me.

BARBARA STEPHENSON:
Thank you.

INTERVIEW ENDS