

SEOUL, South Korea (AP)—A US. Navy task force headed by the aircraft carrier Midway approached Korea today. North Korea said the warships were bound

for its waters and warned that the move would "'force a conflict.'"

The five-ship naval force was ordered from its base in Japan as part of the U.S. military response to the ax-slaying of two U.S. Army officers by North Koreans in the Korean neutral zone last week. The Navy would not give their exact location or destination but a Japanese pilot spotted them shadowed by a Soviet freighter, and said they could be close to the south coast of Korea today.

North Korean broadcasts said the naval operation brought the situation 'closer to the brink of war.' Rodong Shinmoon, the Communist party daily warned that North Korean armed forces are prepared for a "sacred war ... to annihilate the aggressors at one stroke if they dare pounce upon us."

Pyongyang radio quoted the newspaper as "'denouncing the criminal act of US. imperialism in sending the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier Midway into the waters of the northern half of the republic..."

"By infiltrating their warships into the waters of another country, the U.S. imperialist aggressors force a conflict on the other side ..." it added.

A Navy spokesman denied that the Midway—built in the 1940's—was nuclear powered, as described by North Korea.

The 151-mile-long demilitarized zone separating North and South Korea was reported quiet, as it has been since the dispute over the pruning of a tree in the zone last Wednesday led to a free-for-all in which North Koreans hacked to death two Americans.

Thousands of South Korean workers

assembled for rallies today denouncing North Korea for the attack on a United Nations Command working party that was pruning a tree in the joint security zone at Panmunjom.

The workers shouted "'Down with murder-gangster Kim Il-sung,'" the North

Korean president; "'Clubs for mad dog'" and similar slogans.

President Chung Hee \_ Park's Democratic-Republican party and opposition parties issued statements calling on the government to take 'strongest possible measures'' against Communist provocations.

The United States and South Korea both rejected a message from North Korea which said the clash last Wednesday was "regretful."

"We do not find this message to be acceptable since it does not acknowledge responsibility for the deliberate and premeditated murders of the two U.N. Command officers,'" said State Department spokesman John Ordway in Washington.

A Korean official commented: "'The North Koreans did not express even condolences over the officers slain, nor did we find any sense of remorse in their statement.'"

The South Korean Foreign Ministry said the message was delivered orally at a meeting Saturday at Panmunjom. The English text said:

"It was a good thing that no big incident occurred at Panmunjom for a long period. However, it is regretful that an incident occurred in the joint security area, Panmunjom, this time.

"An effort must be made so that such incidents may not recur in the future. For this purpose both sides should make ef-

forts. We urge your side to prevent the provocation. Our side will never provoke first, but take self-defense measures only when provocation occurs. This is our consistent stand."

The message was delivered five hours after a U.N. Command force, acting on orders from President Ford, cut down the 40-foot Normandy poplar which the working party was pruning when the North Koreans attacked it. The tree cutters Saturday were guarded by 30( American and South Korean combat troops and an umbrella of American helicopter gunships, jet fighters and B-52 bombers.

The U.N. Command said the tree blocked its forces' view of North Korean guard posts on the other side of the truce village